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

West Germany, 1972

Director: Werner Herzog

Cert—A. *dist*—Contemporary. *p.c*—Werner Herzog Filmproduktion. In association with Hessischer Rundfunk. *p*—Werner Herzog. *assoc.* *p*—Daniel Carino. *p. managers*—Walter Saxer, Wolf Stipetić. *sc*—Werner Herzog. *ph*—Thomas Mauch, Francisco Joán, Orlando Macchiavello. In colour. *ed*—Beate Mainka-Jellinghaus. *sp. effects*—Juvenal Herrera, Miguel Vazquez. *m*—Popol Vuh. *sd*—Herbert Prasch. *synchronisation*—Bob Oliver. *collaborators*—Gustavo Cerff Arbulú, Martje Grohmann, Dr. Georg Hagmüller, Ina Fritsche, René Lechleitner, Ovidio Ore. *l.p*—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 Martinez, Alejandro Repullés, and Indians of the Lauramarca Co-operative. 8,534 ft. 95 mins. *Subtitles*.

In 1560, a conquistador expedition under Gonzalez Pizarro crosses the Peruvian sierras in search of the legendary Inca city of El Dorado. Brought to a halt by the jungle, Pizarro decides to send a reconnaissance party down the river by raft; this group of forty includes Don Pedro de Ursua, the leader, and his wife Inez, Don Lope de Aguirre, the second-in-command, and his fifteen-year-old daughter, the priest Gaspar de Carvajal and the nobleman Don Fernando de Guzman. One raft is soon stranded by whirlpools and the men on board are killed during the night by Indians; floods damage the other rafts, but the ambitious Aguirre forestalls Ursua's attempt to turn back by staging a mutiny, making a prisoner of Ursua, and declaring Guzman the Emperor of El Dorado. One of Guzman's first acts, to Aguirre's annoyance, is to spare Ursua from hanging. Proceeding downriver, the party comes upon a burning village, and are horrified to find evidence of cannibalism. They are now aware that they are being watched from the banks, and when they come upon a friendly native and his wife, they humiliate him for blasphemy. The party is now weak from hunger, though Guzman continues to dine like a king; when he orders the skittish horse they have kept to be thrown overboard, he rouses the men's anger and soon after is found murdered. Ursua is then taken into the forest and hanged by Aguirre's henchman Perucho. Aguirre leads an attack on another native village (during which Inez simply walks off into the forest), has a potential mutineer executed, and declares anew his vision of wealth and power in El Dorado, calling himself the "Wrath of God". But disease and Indian arrows remorselessly pick off his surviving soldiers, until he is finally alone on the raft, dementedly expounding on his future conquests and the dynasty he will found by marrying his daughter.

As a well-formed narrative, in fact moving along at times like a Hollywood costume drama with a message to deliver about vaulting ambition, *Aguirre, Wrath of God* has all the beguiling simplicity of Werner Herzog's first feature, *Lebenszeichen*. Both are situated in clear historical periods (and in the general context of an invader being gradually driven mad by an aggravated 'cultural shock'—a social and metaphysical displacement), both concern individuals who decide that to cease obeying orders is the key to personal exaltation and to reversing history altogether, and in both, the events that are set in motion by this decision finally wear away the narrative and the hero, obliterating the individual as surely as they fulfil his ambition of wiping the historical slate clean. An obvious difference between the two lies in Herzog's viewpoint on these respective rebellions: Stroszek in the earlier film is allowed to go romantically, all-embracingly mad, with the long final shot reproducing his view of a world receding in the dust and distance; Aguirre is an openly satirised over-reacher, a Shakespearean villain whose thirst for fame and power tips him into a solipsistic madness, a ridiculous puppet (Klaus Kinski's anthology of mannerist ties comes remarkably into its own here) jerked on the strings of his overweening ambition, and finally doomed to drift on the same raft as his more evidently venal companions. Aguirre burns himself out attempting to extend the conquistadors' physical conquest of Peru to the mythical paradise of El Dorado, and the last shot of *Wrath of God* reveals Herzog working backwards, to mordant effect, through the descriptions of the Creation in *Fata Morgana*, with a skimming aerial camera approximating the approach of the gods to the benighted desert, to the very first shot of *Lebenszeichen*, with the army truck carrying the wounded hero away from the action meandering in the distance, like some closely observed bug, over tortuous mountain roads. Here the camera swoops and circles like a curious divinity around the strange apparition of Aguirre's raft, its human crew wholly wiped out and now aswarm with hordes of tiny monkeys, while the 'Wrath of God' himself still stands addressing to the sky his plans for a further "great treachery" in the overthrow of all the realms of New Spain. His figure is frozen in a rigid pose—an imminent fossil of this absurd, illusionist enterprise. The confrontation of the Spaniards with the alien, Amazonian landscape also represents something of a merging of the lyrical detail of *Lebenszeichen*—the bric-à-brac of past civilisations basking in the sun, as forlorn and meaningless as the hero keeping guard over a useless ammunition dump—and the more blackly humorous and surrealist imagery of the wreckage-studded desert of *Fata Morgana*. Like the Western Zoologists in the latter film who paw clumsily at the local wild-life, Aguirre at one point holds up for his daughter's inspection, as a kind of love token, a minute baby sloth ("It sleeps its whole life away . . ."); the turning point in Stroszek's madness, the vista of windmills that finally cracks his tolerance of the infinite multiplication of the signs of life, has its equivalent here in the scene where the soldiers set about plundering a deserted Indian village, only to be horrified and put to flight—despite their need for food—by the rotting evidences of cannibalism. Much of the satiric effect of *Wrath of God* derives from the way it slides in and out of various movie conventions—this, after all, is the tale of an epic journey, the historically fabricated account of a 'lost expedition' whose conveniently surviving trace is the diary of one of its members. It is also a social drama on *Ship of Fools* lines, with life on Aguirre's raft a tiny microcosm of the political world—the inevitable cycle of insurrection, consolidation and repression. To those on the raft, their universe is conterminous with the larger one about them; to those who stand at one remove, it is anything but. Thus Ursua, the expeditionary leader who is first overthrown and then deprived of all rights as a "citizen of El Dorado", becomes a silent and uninvolved observer of subsequent events; and the Indian slave Balthasar (in another reminder of *Lebenszeichen* and the wandering gypsy who suddenly appears at the gates of the hero's fortress and claims to be a king in search of his people) confides in Aguirre's daughter how he used to be a prince, and how, for all their depredations, he pities the Spanish for not seeing, as he does, that there is no way out of the jungle.

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