A Critical History of German Film

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Klaus Kinski as Don Lope de Aguirre. Screen capture.

22: *Aguirre, der Zorn Gottes* (1972): Film and the Sublime

Director: Werner Herzog
Cinematographer: Thomas Mauch
Screenplay: Werner Herzog
Producers: Werner Herzog and Hans Prescher (Werner Herzog Filmproduktion and Hessischer Rundfunk)
Editor: Beate Mainka-Jellinghaus
Music: Popol Vuh
Soundtrack: Herbert Prasch
German Release Date: [West Germany] December 29, 1972
Actors: Klaus Kinski (Don Lope de Aguirre); Helena Rojo (Inez de Atienza); Nicolas Del Negro (Gaspar de Carvajal); Ruy Guerra (Don Pedro de Ursua); Peter Berling (Don Fernando de Guzmann); Cecilia Rivera (Flores); Daniel Ades (Perucho); Edward Roland (Okello); Armando Polanah (Armando); and 270 Indians from the cooperative of Lauramarca
Awards: German Film Award, 1973: Best Cinematography; French Syndicate of Cinema Critics, 1976: Best Foreign Film; National Society of Film Critics Award, 1977: Best Picture

Although generally considered one of the primary representatives of the New German Cinema, Werner Herzog approaches his art in a very different way from his fellow filmmakers. Directors like Kluge, Fassbinder, and Schlöndorff were known for their political activism and commitment, but Herzog has generally tended to steer clear of political involvement. Asked about his ideological commitment, or lack thereof, he responds with a typical lack of modesty: "I do not like to drop names, but what sort of an ideology would you push under the shirt of Conrad or Hemingway or Kafka? Goya or Caspar David Friedrich?"[1] Whereas many of the directors of the New German Cinema dealt with the problems of the German past, particularly Nazism and the postwar reconstruction of West Germany, Herzog has largely avoided explicitly German themes in his films. His fellow filmmakers tended to make historical or social films

[1] Paul Cronin, ed., *Herzog on Herzog* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), 66.

dealing with human beings' predicaments in constricting or imperfect social systems; Herzog, in contrast, depicts human beings who are, for various reasons, independent from or separated from such social systems. Herzog has focused his cinematic attention primarily on unique individuals — almost all of them men. His fellow filmmakers made most of their greatest movies in studios, but Herzog has made his most important movies, *Aguirre, der Zorn Gottes* (Aguirre, the Wrath of God, 1972) and *Fitzcarraldo* (1982) on location, in the Amazon jungle, and almost all of his other films were also made on location, away from a studio. For most of the other directors of the New German Cinema, the primary fact of human existence is embeddedness in society and history; for Herzog, the primary fact of human existence is confrontation with a beautiful but implacable nature, instantiated in the authentic landscapes of his films.

Herzog has thus declared that landscapes are the starting point of his films; these landscapes, Herzog says, "become the film's soul, and sometimes the characters and the story come afterwards, always very naturally."[2] Dana Benelli writes, with justification, that in Herzog's films, "before there is character there is landscape."[3] Landscape becomes a primary force in Herzog's films, a force that impresses itself on the viewer and the characters. Herzog declares: "In my films landscapes are never just picturesque or scenic backdrops as they often are in Hollywood films. In *Aguirre* the jungle is never some lush, beautiful environment it might be in a television commercial." It is, as Herzog puts it, "not just a location, it is a state of our mind" with "almost human qualities."[4]

Central to the politics of the New German Cinema, particularly as instantiated by Kluge, Fassbinder, and Schlöndorff, was the premise that it is possible to use film to help create a better society, and a better world. For left-leaning filmmakers like Kluge, Fassbinder, and Schlöndorff, human nature is not fixed and unchanging, but rather, human nature is determined by historical circumstances, and therefore different historical circumstances create different conceptions of human nature. For such filmmakers, "nature," whether human or nonhuman, is not really a problem; what is a problem, instead, is "culture," defined as the civilization and life-patterns that human beings have created outside of

[2] Cronin, ed., *Herzog on Herzog*, 83.

[3] Dana Benelli, "The Cosmos and its Discontents," in *The Films of Werner Herzog: Between Mirage and History*, ed. Timothy Corrigan (New York and London: Methuen, 1986), 89–103; here, 92.

[4] Cronin, ed., *Herzog on Herzog*, 81.

nature. Left-liberals have tended to view history as a story of progress from one social system to another in a generally positive, goal-oriented way, such as from feudalism to capitalism, from slavery to freedom, or from superstition to enlightenment. For them, history is a more or less straight line pointing onward and upward, not circular or static. It does not repeat the natural cycles of nature but rather emancipates human beings from them.

Herzog's approach to the cinema, and to life, is radically different, and far more conservative in the traditional sense — even though his films themselves can be profoundly, even radically, disturbing.[5] In Herzog's films nature is an overwhelming, implacable power with which human beings must contend. Human beings themselves are puny, but nature is all-powerful and frequently hostile. The title of one of Herzog's films, *Jeder für sich und Gott gegen alle* (literally: Every Man for Himself and God against All; English title: The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser, 1974) — a movie about the legendary foundling Kaspar Hauser, a feral child who was discovered in Nuremberg in 1828 and subsequently murdered — succinctly captures Herzog's belief in an implacable nonhuman force who exists in enmity to all human beings; that this force is called God in the film's title does not suggest any necessary connection to established religion. The very title of *Aguirre, Der Zorn Gottes*, Herzog's most important film, suggests yet another struggle between human beings and an implacable divinity. Its title could in essence be the same as the one for the Kaspar Hauser film (*Jeder für sich und Gott gegen alle*) because in this film, human beings struggle against each other, while an all-powerful nature ultimately defeats everyone. At one point in *Aguirre* the monk Gaspar de Carvajal, praying to God, says: "You cause man to go away like a river, and your years know no end."[6] This is a variation on a psalm that proclaims: "Thou carriest them away as with a flood; they are as a sleep: in the morning they are like grass which groweth up. In the morning it flouresheth, and groweth up; in the evening it is cut down, and withereth. For we are consumed by thine anger, and by thy wrath are we troubled" (Psalm 90: 5–7). *Aguirre*'s very title refers to an angry God in contrast to whom human beings are small and powerless.

[5] John E. Davidson writes rather exaggeratedly that Herzog "has always been . . . an embarrassment to Germans, Germany, and German film," and that since the 1970s Herzog "has moved even more disturbingly to the right." Davidson, "As Others Put Plays upon the Stage: *Aguirre*, Neocolonialism, and the New German Cinema," *New German Critique*, no. 60 (Fall 1993): 101–30; here, 128.

[6] This transcription from the film, and all others, are my own.

Aguirre, which was shot entirely on location in the jungles of South America under difficult conditions, is very loosely based on historical reality: the failed 1560–61 expedition of Pedro de Ursua and Fernando de Guzman to the headwaters of the Amazon River in search of the mythical land of El Dorado — a place believed by the Spanish to be full of gold, as its name implies.[7] Herzog makes Gonzalo Pizarro, the brother of Francisco Pizarro, into the leader of the expedition, with Ursua second-in-command, and he separates Ursua and Aguirre from the main body of the expedition. In reality Lope de Aguirre, a member of Ursua's expedition, led a rebellion against Ursua and Guzman, both of whom were killed; Aguirre was ultimately captured and put to death by the Spanish government. Typically, Herzog changes the ending of the story: instead of having Aguirre captured and put to death by duly constituted legal authorities, he depicts Aguirre isolated from human company, floating in the middle of a river in a vast jungle on a raft covered with corpses and monkeys. It is not the Spanish government but rather Aguirre himself who has the last word in Herzog's film: Aguirre, played by a demoniacal-looking Klaus Kinski in one of that actor's greatest roles, proclaims that he will establish his own empire in El Dorado and marry his own daughter — who lies dead on the raft. As the raft slowly spins in the water, Aguirre walks around and around in circles, and the camera approaches the raft from a distance and begins to rotate around it and its single surviving human occupant. The three-fold circular motion of this brilliant shot — moving man, moving raft, and moving camera — coupled with Aguirre's megalomaniacal dialogue about his future wealth and power, creates a powerful sensation not of goal-oriented historical progress toward a bright future (the mythical El Dorado) but rather of an insane, disoriented overreaching that is inevitably doomed to failure.[8] Aguirre captures one of the little monkeys that are running around on the raft and holds it in his hands, only to throw it back down; they are his only living companions, and he appears to be their lord and master. But in Herzog's somber and beautiful vision of human vainglory, it is the seemingly powerless monkeys who are better equipped for survival in the jungle than Aguirre, who the audience knows is doomed to failure. He cannot marry his daughter because she

[7] For a look at the way that Herzog changes the story, see Gregory A. Waller, "*Aguirre, The Wrath of God*: History, Theater, and the Camera," *South Atlantic Review* 46, no. 2 (May 1981): 55–69.

[8] Herzog had initially intended to end the film on a raft on which not even Aguirre was still alive. Instead, the only living creature was to be a parrot that screams "El Dorado" as the raft flows into the open sea. Werner Herzog, *Screenplays*, trans. Alan Greenberg and Martje Herzog (New York: Tanam Press, 1980), 7–95;

is dead, and he cannot find El Dorado because it does not exist — as the film states in a written text at the beginning, the idea of El Dorado was always just payback by the Indians whom the Spaniards had violated.[9] By the end of the film that bears his name, Aguirre is a man lost in a vast world that he can neither really see nor comprehend, and that world will inevitably destroy him. Lutz Koepnick has observed that "within Herzog's expressionist vocabulary of nature . . . the jungle seems to denote a text that frustrates all hermeneutic efforts from the outset; with coarse brutality, the chaotic diversity of the rain forest exposes the systematic inappropriateness of Western routines of cognition and ordering."[10] Aguirre is certainly a representative of those Western routines, but because of his rebellion he is also different: he represents the West's own techniques of domination being turned inward, against themselves. Hence, there is a certain grandeur — what John Davidson calls an "enigmatic nobility" — to Aguirre's overreaching.[11] He may be a villain with a limp, like Shakespeare's *Richard III*, but he is also a hero. Here the film's title becomes even more significant. In his final monologue, Aguirre refers to himself for the second time as "der Zorn Gottes" (the wrath of God), and although this is an example of his criminal megalomania, it is also, in a bizarre way, true on the film's own terms. In essence, Aguirre, as wild and implacable as he is, is only doing to the expedition what nature would have done anyway. From the very beginning this expedition was doomed to failure — it is, after all, an expedition in search of a purely mythical city — and Aguirre, with his madness, can be seen as nature's — or God's — revenge. Already in the first ten minutes of the film, Aguirre has warned Pizarro that no one will be able to get down the river alive, and he is right. Aguirre is insane, but there is an authenticity and a truth to his insanity that align him with a nature — or a God, since Herzog does not appear to make a distinction between the two — that has no interest in what supposedly civilized humans call rationality. Herzog has stated that it is not the protagonists of his films who are insane; rather, "it is society that is mad. It is the situations they find themselves in and the people who surround them who are mad."[12]

[9] In Herzog's original screenplay, as in historical reality, Aguirre kills his daughter himself in order to keep her from witnessing his possible capture and defeat.

[10] Luz P. Koepnick, "Colonial Forestry: Sylvan Politics in Werner Herzog's *Aguirre* and *Fitzcarraldo*," *New German Critique*, no. 60 (Autumn 1993): 133–59; here, 135. I have changed the word "course" in the original text to "coarse," which was probably intended.

[11] Davidson, "As Others Put Plays upon the Stage," 123.

[12] Cronin, ed., *Herzog on Herzog*, 69.

Again and again the film depicts the vast, relentless beauty of the South American rain forest. *Aguirre* begins with a majestic camera shot depicting the descent of Gonzalo Pizarro's expedition down a mountain toward the river where it will meet its doom. That downward motion will continue throughout the film, providing, as Koepnick suggests, "a prelude to the fall of colonialism that the spectator will witness throughout the rest of the film."[13] The descent is steep, and members of the expedition look completely out of place in this landscape. In the very opening shot of the film, they are so overwhelmed by their surroundings that they can barely even be seen. Ursua's mistress Inez and Aguirre's daughter Flores wear the elegant clothing of Spanish noblewomen, completely inappropriate for such a descent; Inez is assisted by Ursua, while Flores is helped by her father Aguirre. Both are accompanied by sedan chairs that once again emphasize the inappropriateness of the explorers' gear to their surroundings. Fernando de Guzman is a fat, unathletic man who obviously could not survive very long on his own on the slopes of the mountain or in the jungle. From these very first camera shots, Herzog establishes the terms of his cinematic discourse: the majesty and implacability of nature versus the puny and sometimes insane striving of man. When one of the expedition's cannons crashes down the mountain into the water, it signals the ultimate teleology of the west's technological and military superiority. At the bottom of the mountain, Pizarro tells Aguirre that things will be looking up from now on; Aguirre correctly replies that things will continue to go downhill. While the opening scenes have a voice-over narration by the Spanish monk, Gaspar de Carvajal, telling the film's viewers what is happening, by the end of the film Carvajal has died, and there is no more narrative voice to orient the film's viewers, only the insane voice of Aguirre himself. Aguirre's rebellion against the expedition does not occur until the river itself has already begun to destroy the explorers' rafts, suggesting that he is acting in alignment with a natural force. When, after Ursua's overthrow, Guzman is made "emperor" in order to serve as Aguirre's figurehead, he cuts a pathetic figure; his physical and intellectual incapacity contrast markedly with his supposedly august position in a newly decreed human hierarchy. Guzman delightedly notes that his supposed empire, which consists of everything to his left and right as he moves down the river, is now six times larger than Spain itself, but Aguirre mockingly reminds him that the marsh around him could not even support his fat body, and in the end Guzman dies ignominiously, shot by native Indians with an

[13] Koepnick, "Colonial Forestry," 144.

arrow just after he has relieved himself in a floating outhouse. Guzman is an emperor who is also a clown. Herzog is suggesting that human societies can call themselves what they want and interpret reality however they like, but that ultimately nature will triumph over any human society. Guzman as "emperor" and ultimately Aguirre himself on his spinning raft represent human society itself in its pitiful helplessness when confronted with an all-powerful, uncaring nature.

Ursua's mistress Inez ultimately chooses the indifference of nature over the evil of Aguirre's society. In one of the film's most dramatic sequences, the explorers have just arrived in a cannibal village and had a brief skirmish with the natives; Inez, wearing a white dress that the film's viewers have never seen before, walks with measured steps into the primeval jungle, which swallows her up. She has become what Brigitte Peucker calls a "bride of Death."[14] Herzog has stated that *Aguirre* is "like a Greek tragedy" because the protagonist "is deliberately leading his soldiers to their — and his — destruction."[15] And indeed, his film does bear some of the characteristics of Greek tragedy: it takes place in a world of unmitigated violence in which, as George Steiner writes, "things are as they are, unrelenting and absurd."[16] Aguirre deliberately leads his expedition to destruction and Inez deliberately walks into the jungle, both becoming one with nature through their own destruction — Inez part of the jungle world and Aguirre the temporary leader of a band of monkeys. For Nietzsche tragedy is associated with a Dionysian impulse that "seeks to destroy the individual and redeem him by a mystic feeling of oneness" with nature, and it is profoundly associated with music.[17] In Herzog's world the music of Popol Vuh (the artistic name taken by Herzog's friend Florian Fricke) invokes and precedes the tragedy; it is an ethereal music that Herzog describes as "both pathetic and surreal," neither "real singing, nor . . . completely artificial."[18] This music is very important for creating the mood of *Aguirre*, and it recalls Nietzsche's dictum that "language can never adequately render the cosmic

[14] Brigitte Peucker, "Werner Herzog: In Quest of the Sublime," in *New German Filmmakers: From Oberhausen through the 1970s*, ed. Klaus Phillips (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1984), 168–94; here, 178.

[15] Cronin, ed., *Herzog on Herzog*, 79.

[16] George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1996), 9.

[17] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, in Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1967), 29–144; here, 28.

[18] Cronin, ed., *Herzog on Herzog*, 80. Popol Vuh is the Mayan creation story, and this name once again connects Herzog and his films to primordial myth.

symbolism of music, because music stands in symbolic relation to the primordial contradiction and primordial pain in the heart of the primal unity, and therefore symbolizes a sphere which is beyond and prior to all phenomena."[19] The goal of the film is for its characters, particularly Aguirre himself, to enter into "the heart of the primal unity," a oneness with nature achieved only in, and through, death. Herzog stages a confrontation between the Apollonian world of the European settlers — called by the native Indians "sons of the sun," the celestial object that Nietzsche had invoked to symbolize Greek optimism — and the mythic, Dionysian world of the Amazon jungle and its inhabitants. In the end it is the mythic, Dionysian world that prevails. As a former Indian prince — now reduced to a slave — remarks to Inez: "I know that there is no way out of this jungle." In the end, Aguirre's expedition has become the "meat, meat, meat" about which the Indians chant as they see them floating by toward the end of the film. Herzog makes it explicit that at least some members of the expedition fall victim to the cannibals and are eaten. This too connects Herzog's film to Greek tragedy, which was originally associated with the dismemberment and consumption of raw human flesh.[20]

Werner Herzog was born Werner Stipetic three years before the end of the Second World War, on September 5, 1942, and he experienced the collapse of a megalomaniacal human society when he was two years old. One of Herzog's documentaries, *Little Dieter Needs to Fly* (1997), depicts a German like himself, Dieter Dengler, who witnessed the collapse of the Third Reich in his early childhood; Dengler overcame this childhood trauma by allying himself with the power that had defeated Germany and becoming a U.S. airman in the Vietnam War, during the course of which he was shot down and had to find his way out of the jungle. This documentary — whose story also became the subject of Herzog's 2007 feature film, *Rescue Dawn* — suggests some of the themes that seem to have motivated Herzog throughout his career: Germany's defeat and subsequent collapse; a sense that there is an indifferent force that is superior to any human society; and an attempt to understand and ally himself with that force. Herzog studied history, literature, and drama in Munich and, briefly, in Pittsburgh. He chose Pittsburgh, he later claimed, because "I did not want to go somewhere overly fancy," and Pittsburgh was, he believed, "a place where there were real working people and steel mills. But by the time I arrived in the early 1960s

[19] Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 55.

[20] William Storm, *After Dionysus: A Theory of the Tragic* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1998), 19.

the city was already heavily in decline. The steel mills were shutting down and life for many people was falling apart."[21] Herzog broke off his studies and taught himself filmmaking. He was awarded the Silver Bear at the 1968 Berlin International Film Festival for his first feature film, *Lebenszeichen* (Signs of Life), also about the rebellion of a military man against human authority. When asked how he learned to be a filmmaker, Herzog has consistently replied that he was almost entirely self-taught, as if he had emerged from nothingness. His answers separate him from any filmmaking community and history and make him almost like a character in one of his own films, isolated from regular human society and fending for himself. The film scholar Thomas Elsaesser has compiled a collage of Herzog's self-mythologizing descriptions of his own genesis as a filmmaker:

> I'd almost say, the news of my birth is nothing but a rumour. My grandfather, who was an archeologist, died mad, and I admired him very much. My mother is Yugoslav. I have a very complicated family. My father lives like a vagabond. He was married twice. I have many brothers and sisters, but some are half- or quarter-brothers. I wasn't brought up in the system. I am an autodidact and have never been to film school. While I was doing my studies I worked at night in a steel mill in Munich. For two years I was chained from 6 pm to 8 am. I made enough money to shoot my first short in 35 mm. I hired a cameraman, and there was the Munich Institute for Film Research, a precursor of the Munich Film School today, and these bastards had three cameras locked in some kind of safe, and I went and "borrowed" one of them. I think to this day they don't realize that one of their cameras is missing. Under these circumstances, I think it was right to appropriate the means of production.
>
> What made me a film-maker? — I made myself a film-maker.[22]

The camera that Herzog stole in Munich in the early 1960s was also the camera that accompanied him and his cameraman Thomas Mauch to the tributaries of the Amazon in *Aguirre, der Zorn Gottes*, as well as in eight other movies. Herzog's other major feature films include the aforementioned *Jeder für sich und Gott gegen alle* (1974), which, like *Aguirre*, demonstrates Herzog's fascination with people who are somehow outside of human society. Kaspar Hauser in Herzog's film is that rarest of human individuals, a person at one with nature. *Stroszek* (1977)

[21] Cronin, ed., *Herzog on Herzog*, 20.

[22] Thomas Elsaesser, *New German Cinema: A History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1989), 91. This is a collage from various interviews given by Herzog.

is Herzog's exploration of the United States; it relates the story of a down-on-his-luck and not particularly intelligent Berliner, the eponymous Stroszek, who somehow winds up in Wisconsin surrounded by mobile homes and truckers. Ultimately the failure of Stroszek's American dream destroys him. *Stroszek* ends with circular images that hark back to the ending of *Aguirre*: it, too, features three circular motions: Stroszek's beat-up old truck, without a driver, moving around in circles; a chicken "dancing" on a circular platform in an amusement arcade; and the ski lift in which Stroszek shoots himself. Asked why he made *Stroszek*, Herzog once replied, "in Western Europe . . . there is *such* a strong domination of American culture and American films! And *all* of us who are working in filmmaking have to deal with this sort of domination. For me, it was particularly important to define my position about this country and its culture, and that's one of the major reasons why I made *Stroszek*."[23] Herzog's critique of American culture and American imagery is connected to his choice of authentic locations for a film like *Aguirre*, because it is in such locations that Herzog hopes to find new, fresh images:

> I have the impression that the images that surround us today are worn out; they are abused and useless and exhausted. They are limping and dragging themselves behind the rest of our cultural evolution. When I look at the postcards in tourist shops and the images and advertisements that surround us in magazines, or I turn on the television, or if I walk into a travel agency and see those huge posters with that same tedious image of the Grand Canyon on them, I truly feel there is something dangerous emerging here. The biggest danger, in my opinion, is television because to a certain degree it ruins our vision and makes us very sad and lonesome. Our grandchildren will blame us for not having tossed hand-grenades into TV stations because of commercials. Television kills our imagination and what we end up with are worn-out images because of the inability of too many people to seek out fresh ones.[24]

In 1978 Herzog did a remake of Friedrich Murnau's great vampire film *Nosferatu*, also with Klaus Kinski (in the role of the vampire); that film showed Herzog's allegiance to German expressionist cinema — with its themes of alienation and madness — as well as his continuing focus on main characters who are on the margins of, or even opposed to, mainstream

[23] Roger Ebert, *Images at the Horizon: A Workshop with Werner Herzog Conducted by Roger Ebert*, ed. Gene Walsh (Chicago: Facets Multimedia, 1979), 11.

[24] Cronin, ed., *Herzog on Herzog*, 66.

society. Herzog filmed Georg Büchner's classic drama *Woyzeck*, once again with Klaus Kinski, in 1979. In 1980–81 Herzog returned to South America to film *Fitzcarraldo*, yet another film with Klaus Kinski (who died in 1991 at the age of sixty-five).[25] This was Herzog's most commercially successful film at the time, but it was also the most difficult to make; it depicted the adventures of an impresario whose goal is to establish an opera company in the middle of the jungle. For this film Herzog actually had an entire ship carried up over the top of a mountain and down the other side. In some ways Herzog as a filmmaker shares the megalomania of his main characters.

After *Fitzcarraldo*, Herzog made *Wo die grünen Ameisen träumen* (Where the Green Ants Dream, 1984), a feature film about a confrontation between aborigines and whites in Australia, and *Cobra Verde* (1987), his final film with Klaus Kinski, based on a novel by Bruce Chatwin. Since then he has focused mostly on documentaries and now lives and works primarily in the United States. In order to secure his own artistic control of his films, Herzog has his own production company, Werner Herzog Film Production. In 2005 he released another documentary, *Grizzly Man*, about the life and death of Timothy Treadwell, an American nature lover who made it his life goal to protect Alaskan grizzly bears, and who was ultimately devoured by one in 2003. In *Grizzly Man*, Herzog discusses Treadwell's approach to nature and contrasts it with his own. Whereas Treadwell believed that nature was cuddly and cute, Herzog declares, he himself sees nature as hard and cruel. This attitude toward nature comes as no surprise to viewers of *Aguirre*, or of *Burden of Dreams*, Les Blank's 1982 documentary about the making of *Fitzcarraldo*, in which Herzog, looking out at the Amazon jungle around him, declares:

> Taking a close look at what's around us, there is some kind of harmony. It is the harmony of overwhelming and collective murder. And we in comparison to the articulate vileness and baseness and obscenity of all this jungle. . . . We in comparison to that enormous articulation, we only sound and look like badly pronounced and half-finished sentences out of a stupid suburban novel, a cheap novel. . . . And we have to become humble in front of this overwhelming misery and overwhelming fornication, overwhelming growth and overwhelming lack of order.[26]

[25] Herzog created a fascinating documentary about his work with Kinski in 1999: *Mein liebster Feind* (My Best Fiend).

[26] Les Blank and James Bogan, eds., *Burden of Dreams: Screenplay, Journals, Reviews, Photographs* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 1984), 57. Ellipses in the original. In the original there is a paragraph break before the last sentence, which I have eliminated.

About *Aguirre, der Zorn Gottes*, Herzog said that the film's attraction and "the advantage it has over Hollywood — is that it is real. The spectacle is real; the danger is real. It is the real life of the jungle, not the botanic gardens of the studio. . . . It is easy enough to make a film in your own living room; but imagine trying to make one with 500 people in the Amazon tributaries. We had a budget of a little over $300,000; but to look at, *Aguirre* is a 3-million dollar film."[27]

As different as he is from the other directors of the New German Cinema, Herzog does share some similarities with them. His insistence on authenticity and on-location shooting, as well as his criticism of American kitsch, position him as a powerful critic of Hollywood specifically and American culture more generally. This critique of Hollywood aligns Herzog even with a filmmaker as self-consciously leftist and progressive as Alexander Kluge. Herzog's focus on loneliness and grotesquerie, as well as on power relationships, connects him to Rainer Werner Fassbinder. Whereas Kluge and Fassbinder deal with the problems of the German past, however, Herzog's subject is the battle between man and nature at a fundamental, existential level. History often plays a role in his films, but the story is usually the same one, no matter the historical epoch: the story of human inadequacy in the face of nature.[28] And his heroes can rarely be integrated into any kind of social normality. They are either, like Aguirre, almost superhuman megalomaniacs, or, like the dwarfs in Herzog's bizarre feature film *Auch Zwerge haben klein angefangen* (Even Dwarves Started Small, 1970), freaks. This is true even of an American-made feature film like *The Bad Lieutenant: Port of Call — New Orleans* (2009).

In his fascination with nature, Herzog draws on powerful currents from the German Romantic tradition with which he was already familiar as a child; Brigitte Peucker has called Herzog "the profoundest and most authentic heir of the Romantic tradition at work today."[29] Frequently in German Romanticism — as in the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich — man is a disturbing element in an otherwise pristine and beautiful nature. This is the case in Herzog's films as well. Man comes into nature and disturbs it, but only momentarily. In the end nature will triumph over man, not the other way around. Hence, although Herzog's films are certainly related to the growth of ecological thinking in the 1960s and 1970s, they

[27] Vernon Young, "Much Madness: Werner Herzog and Contemporary German Cinema," *The Hudson Review* 30, no. 3 (Autumn 1977): 409–14; here, 410.

[28] See Benelli, "The Cosmos and its Discontents," 89.

[29] Peucker, "Werner Herzog: In Quest of the Sublime," 193. See also the same article, 170 on Herzog's reading of the Romantics in his childhood.

differ from that thinking in their focus on the ultimate invulnerability and power of nature itself.

What is generally missing in Herzog's films — with the notable exception of his film *Invincible* (2001), about a Jewish strongman in 1920s Berlin — is any explicit reference to German history or the German present. And it was to German history and the German present that a group of far more political filmmakers were to turn seven years after Herzog's *Aguirre* when they made *Deutschland im Herbst* (Germany in Autumn, 1979), the topic of the next chapter.