

“Herzog’s *Aguirre*” by Wendy Walker, <http://wendywalker.com> (Essay on the film *Aguirre, Wrath of God*). Under Other Writing/Projects© Wendy Walker 2013

“Herzog’s *Aguirre*” (1992) was written for an anthology, never realized, of essays by writers on particular films. The selection of the film was left up to the writer.

Herzog’s *Aguirre*

Herzog’s *Aguirre, Wrath of God* begins with the successful scaling of heights. A band of blonde Spaniards and a pair of ladies in unwilting lace descend a precipitous jungle mountain on foot. At the bottom, the ladies resume their sedan chairs which promptly stick in the mud. Framed in the vehicle’s window, beautiful and helpless, one of the noblewomen watches anxiously while an army is marshaled to keep the box from sinking. Pizarro, the expedition’s illustrious commander, has allowed this enterprise the founder. Admitting himself lost, he deposes a party to search down river. Commanded by the honorable but pedestrian Ursua, it will soon be usurped by Aguirre, the squinting visionary of the loping walk.

They arrive at a river. Close in, the turbulent water piles up momentary mountains and dismisses them, aeons as seconds. But from the shore, the river seems a winding film of light. Film, story as light, rapid, reflective, elemental.

The search party launches rafts, the most important since Géricault’s: half-submerged, and barely manageable, the pictorial frame is on the move again.

Aguirre’s raft supports himself, his crew, two perfectly groomed objects of the gaze, and a cannon, the instrument that shoots (usually at an invisible enemy). The instrument’s potential destructiveness appears at once; as they descend to the river, a cannon tumbles from the path and blows itself up. As the rafts approach the rapids, Herzog allows droplets splashed on the lens to linger there, so that for a moment we are the eye, going down the river, exploring the story from inside, moment by moment, with all the director’s own risk. Over the churning water one flimsy raft eyes another, taking different points of view inside the work.

Enormous discrepancies support between Herzog’s tale and the historical record support reading the film as an allegory. The actual differences in character among Ursua, Guzman and Aguirre were in fact not so great, although Aguirre was considered a

psychopath even by conquistador standards. Klaus Kinski appears almost mild beside the documented serial killer who murdered his own daughter, cared nothing for El Dorado, determined to wrest Peru from Spain, and particularly favored strangling as a political procedure.

Herzog pieces his mosaic with care. None of the tesserae are invented, but their placement is often fantastical, forming a coherent fiction. Aguirre, betraying Ursua and usurping his command, violates the conception of exploration laid down by Pizarro*. Aguirre cleverly cites Cortés, the sole conquistador of equal achievement, as providing a precedent for his own disobedience. Cortés, despite orders to turn back, went on, Aguirre tells his anxious soldiers, and conquered Mexico "*because* he disobeyed." Indeed, the history of El Dorado explorations-- each leader dying at the hands of a follower who then, as leader, suffers the same fate-- provides an ironic parallel to the history of art.

Aguirre's identity as mad artist/director-to-be is established early, when he goes into a frenzy at the sedan chair's sticking in the mud. The situation is intolerable to him. He whips the bearers, screams for more soldiers, pulls and thrusts wildly by their side, up to his thighs in water. The beautiful image in the frame must not halt for a moment, much less be lost. There is no question of showing humanity to those who are at fault. The price of movement forward will always be paid.

Aguirre's allegorical identity shows firmly when, from behind the scenes, he engineers the mock election of Guzman. Having caused the ouster of Ursua, whom we see shot in the chest, Aguirre will confirm his ongoing relation to his predecessor by carrying him along for much of the trip, silent and alive in his coffin. After the shooting of Ursua, Aguirre refrains from direct action, but clearly stays in invisible control of his puppets. With the assistance of the monk Carvajal, who inscribes the document that "legalizes" the new dispensation, Aguirre enunciates his predicament and intentions: "Fate, God's help, and the work of our hands have driven us down a river... in search of a new land of gold. We have decided to put an end to the quirks of fate. We are forging history... We rebel to the death. Our hands shall perish and our tongues dry up if this is not so. The House of Habsburg is overthrown, you, Philip II, are dethroned. By the

*The Pizarro who led an expedition in search of El Dorado was not the Pizarro who conquered Peru but rather one of his half-brothers; however, the viewer does not know this.

power of this declaration you are obliterated." Defiance of temporal power fits snugly into both tenor and vehicle. Having spoken, Aguirre takes a plank, pushes Guzman down upon it, and rolling up the scripted document, plants it, a scepter, in the new Emperor's hand. Guzman weeps for the disparity between the assertion and the truth, for the paltriness of both reality and dream; but eventually he becomes happily reconciled, conflating act and dream under the influence of Aguirre.

By defying the order of the real with simply transformed objects and words literally twisted into an emblem of power, Aguirre realizes a political *mise en scène* which brings his mad dream closer than ever. But the uncompromising madness of the artist and the power it confers upon him shows most vividly when Aguirre, overhearing one of his soldiers outlining plans to escape, orders him beheaded even as he goes on explaining his plans. In a dazzling moment, the soldier's head flies to a spot on the ground where it continues speaking: Aguirre, the director, has demonstrated that speech beyond death is possible.

Though the voyage starts off in mountainous regions—the type of landscape in which El Dorado supposedly was to be found—the raft drifts into perfectly level country; the flatter the territory becomes, the more certain Aguirre grows of the nearness of their destination. Hallucinating, he sees a boat in the branches of a tree, fluttering its sails, speaking of ocean. Though his men are shot, and die of starvation, his belief in El Dorado only waxes. "We must conquer," he decrees, "even if it is only trees and water." Trees and water are just what we see: the search for El Dorado, which we have been watching in two senses, is hopeless, daemonic, and queerly noble.