

■ **Forgotten film**

Herzog parallels film content, story creation in 'Fitzcarraldo'

Herzog displays striking images and creative plotting in his 1982 film

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The opening scenes of Werner Herzog's 1982 film "Fitzcarraldo" tells you everything you need to know about its main character and, in a way, about Herzog himself. We first meet Brian Sweezy Fitzgerald, known as Fitzcarraldo (played by the wonderful Klaus Kinski in one of his best roles) as he rafts madly upriver to the docks of a city. He has been on the water for days, trying to make it to a performance by opera great Enrico Caruso. His hands are bloody and his eyes are manic, but when he makes it into the opera house, a look of near transcendence overtakes him. This is a man of great passions.

Fitzcarraldo loves opera as much as he loves life. That he lives in Peru in the early years of the twentieth century — not exactly a hub for the sort of culture opera thrives in — hardly dampens his passion. His biggest dream is to bring an opera house to the large but isolated town of Iquitos, a city where colonialists have made it rich in the rubber trade while the natives live in rotting squalor. Fitzcarraldo lives between these two worlds. He is European, but a failure as a businessman. He spends his days entertaining local children with recordings of great operas or using a chemical process to make ice — a novelty many of the natives have never seen.

Herzog is a smart enough director to take colonialism as a fact of life rather than to make some grand statement about it. He takes the environment that such exploitation breeds as his setting for the story of a man who not only fails at all of his projects, but fails spectacularly. His previous project involved building a railroad through the Amazon jungle, a project which left only two hundred yards of track and a locomotive with nowhere to go.

His latest project is the most ambitious yet. Borrowing money from his devoted fiancé Molly, the owner of the local



COURTESY

Director Werner Herzog went to great lengths to create the images in "Fitzcarraldo," going so far as to actually haul a steamship up the side of a mountain.

bordello, he buys a tract of rubber trees in a patch of land none of the local rubber barons have been able to exploit. The reason no one else has touched the land is that the only means of transporting the rubber is by the river, which is inaccessible in that region due to an inconveniently placed waterfall. Fitzcarraldo comes up with a plan to take a steamboat, take it upriver and then drag it over a mountain to the isolated area.

What makes the project even more amazing is that, in order to create the sequence for the film, the filmmakers actually dragged a steamboat up a mountain and slid it down the other side. So rarely does the content of a film and the story behind its creation connect with such odd parallel. Herzog is a director of large visions and ambitious projects. That he has often used his talents to direct opera should come as no surprise to anyone who has seen his films.

In "Fitzcarraldo," Herzog has created some of the most striking images ever filmed, period, no questions. The foggy trip upriver is sharpened by the threat of attack from hostile natives in the area.

In order to win their friendship, Fitzcarraldo plays records of Caruso on a gramophone placed on top of the ship. The unseen natives are silent as the music plays, but they soon begin drumming along with the music in an enchanting piece of cross-cultural synchronization. When the first lever system used to drag the ship uphill snaps under the pressure, the ship's cook comes up with the idea of using the ship's anchor to pull itself. We are then treated to the image of this gigantic machine doing something no one ever intended it to do as it pulls itself inch by inch to the top of the hill.

I would not be giving anything away by saying that the project fails miserably, though I will leave out the details. Nearly all of Herzog's films concern dreamers whose dreams collapse before their eyes. That this film was made at all might be considered a refutation of this, but in the final scenes when Fitzcarraldo finds some form of redemption it is easy to see that Herzog knows exactly what he is trying to do.

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