

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Fitzcarraldo 1982

Werner Herzog

OVERVIEW

Fitzcarraldo is a 1982 German adventure film, which is at the same time a film partly about the film itself, and about the making of it. In critical terms forged later than the time of the film, this movie might want to be called postmodern, for it not only tells a story, but tells the story of telling its story. We will deal with that doubleness, as we get into the story issue below.

Behind this narrative there lies—as with *Kaspar Hauser*, or *Woyzeck*, or even *Heart of Glass*—an historical nub, in this case a real Peruvian rubber baron by name Carlos Fitzcarrald, who in the present instance has been transformed into an Irishman named Brian Fitzgerald, who came to Peru to make his fortune in rubber, who took on the local nomenclature, Fitzcarraldo, and who settled in the Peruvian Amazon city of Iquitos, which was in the early twentieth century feeding on its natural wealth in rubber, and growing exponentially. The life drivers for Fitzcarraldo are the longing for wealth—think of *Aguirre* or *Cobra Verde*—and the desire to establish an opera house in Iquitos—which can attract sophisticated visitors from abroad, and an abundance of new investment money, itself formed around the abundance of rubber.

STORY

Arrival. The story opens with the arrival of Fitzcarraldo and his lover, Molly—the owner of the largest brothel in Iquitos—in the fairly makeshift port of the city. Before long we realize the long term plans of this would be Irish rubber baron, this passionate lover of opera, who dreams of transplanting grand opera to the bustling and ambitious young city in the Peruvian Amazon. It is not Fitzcarraldo's first effort, at boosting the trade and name of the city, for he has previously (and with no success) worked to bring a trans-jungle railway in from the coast. It is a similar kind of wealth and adventure dream that haunts him on his present arrival in Iquitos.

Plan. With the help of Molly's cash, Fitzcarraldo—the irrepressible Klaus Kinski, dressed in a white suit and panama hat—invests in a large revamped river boat, which he intends to sail up river from Iquitos, to a point on the Ucayali River, where the last unsold tracts of raw rubber plantation were to be found. His grand plan, as we see, will be to sail up the Amazon from Iquitos, make his way (somehow) to the Ucayali River, to gather rubber, and to return to Iquitos bringing wealth and the foundation of a robust opera culture.

Underway. Fitzcarraldo must first attend to recruiting a team for the upriver adventure. As it happens, the majority of the crew abandon ship shortly after they realize what their mission is, especially the very dangerous challenge of sailing the Amazon upstream. There remain only Fitzcarraldo, his much experienced captain, the cook, and the engineer, who takes care of keeping the ship running, and who remains faithful to the mission from start to finish. The challenges sharpen as the ship moves deeper into Indian country—the homeland of the Jivaro tribes, famed for head-shrinking their enemies—and into a topography which will block their continued route. As the mission nears that blockage point, a poisoned arrow, shot just over the head of the engineer, reminds them of the hard choices about to confront them. The next morning they see the shore covered with Indian canoes, and realize that an operation is underway to block their advance *at exactly that point*. The Indians are felling huge trees, which are filling the river channel.

Adventure. The true adventure begins at this point, and arguably sidelines the search for rubber and its wealth—puts risk, daring, and bravado at the center of the film. Fitzcarraldo manages to get the Indians

peacefully on board the ship—he lets them watch and finger him and the crew as they dine, and warily wins over their general acceptance, to the point where they are eating and sleeping on board. Bit by bit he wins them over, it seems, to an acceptance of his mission, of which at this point they may understand only that are being sheltered and fed. But they are soon to know far more about the mission, and in fact to find themselves major actors in the film's most dramatic episode, the transportation of the ship from its blocked river channel over a muddy 40 degree hillside to access the Ucayali River, where they were to find the raw rubber plantation mentioned above. We watch open jawed as the Indians and the crew complete this insanely challenging feat of transportation.

Ship At this point the ship itself becomes the main actor. Fitzcarraldo is determined to transport the 20 ton steamer over the muddy hill on the far side of which lies the Ucayali, which should not only yield rubber but should prove an avenue on which to sail back to Iquitos. From what we observe, the Indians more or less enthusiastically join in the stupendous work project, which involves laying of wooden tracks along which, with the help of huge steel-like wooden stanchions, the boat can be winched up the hill and down the other side. (The drama of this feat is laid out before us in full sweat detail, as is the inspiring bravado of Fitzcarraldo, who throughout behaves as a flamboyant and totally convinced mission leader.) The only serious hitch is the death of one Indian, who is crushed in the winching equipment; not enough, however, to deflect the Indians as a group, especially given that Fitzcarraldo seems to them to be the White God awaited three hundred years by the Jivaros.

Postmodernity. The narrative of the ship hauling, is at the same time a narrative about the acting out and the filming of the ship hauling; in other words Herzog is including in his tale a retrospective dimension, in which he is drawing attention to what he has been doing in the film, and how he has been doing it. (The documentary film by Les Blank, *Burden of Dreams*, features sensationally gripping interviews with Herzog on site in the Amazon Jungle, during the course of making the present film. In those interviews Herzog makes clear that he was deeply interested in the relation to the jungle that he was embedded in, as he undertook his epic boat haul. In evaluating his achievement, in overseeing the boat haul, he called himself a 'Conquistador of the Useless,' a true postmodern Conquistador, setting himself a vain challenge and fully meeting the test he has posed to himself.

Conclusion After the boat has been hauled over to the Ucayali River, the expected rubber plantation turns out to have no value for him, and with many dangerous rapids and cliffside brushes, and near accidents, Fitzcarraldo and his now very mixed crew make their ways back to Iquitos. There, disgusted with his large imperial schemes, Fitzcarraldo sells the boat to the rubber baron who had helped him get started on the present adventure. Before leaving the boat, however, Fitzcarraldo invites onto it a grand opera touring company, which performs on deck to initiate the new opera house of which Fitzcarraldo has dreamed.

THEMES

Drive. Iquitos, and the Amazon Basin, owed to the international market in rubber products their booming early twentieth century economies, and the presence of any number of American and Western European adventurers, eager to exploit the opportunities of the region. Fitzcarraldo was a perfect example of the driven guys who moved in on this opportunity.

Adventure. Fitzcarraldo himself is impelled by desire for wealth, but even more by the need for adventure. Prior to the Ucayali effort, he had undertaken an even more improbable venture, to promote a trans-Andean railways through the jungle from the West Coast to Iquitos.

Persistence. The postmodernist lens in which Herzog displays the boat haul, over the hilltop, effectively highlights the dogged effort the film director was prepared to invest, in making the film most expressive of himself.

Primitivism. As elsewhere, in *Aguirre and Cobra Verde*, Herzog is powerfully drawn to pre industrial people's behaviors—African, South American—for their color, energy, and often high stakes risky behaviors. His treatment of the Jivaro Indian tribespeople, encountered by Fitzcarraldo upstream from

Iquitos, is fine textured and sympathetic, packed with appreciative pictorial detail—a cut of profile, collective eyes of wonderment, skittery uncertain anxiety.

CHARACTERS

Fitzcarraldo is the fierce, driven, ambitious focus of the present film, which is about an adventurous Irishman's passion for discovery, wealth, and proving it was all possible. Nothing was able to block Fitzcarraldo's scheme, to sail upriver and make it back for a premiere performance of classic opera.

Rubber baron. Fitzcarraldo's advisor in Iquitos who informs him that there is still some available rubber land on the Ucayali. It is this friendly gent who helps arrange the returning ceremonies for Fitzcarraldo, who is treated like a star by the whole community of music lovers.

Captain. Arguably the most stabilizing of the small cadre of crew who stick with Fitzcarraldo's mission, after learning of its dangers. The cook has survived an earlier upriver encounter with the Jivaros, and is ready for the worst.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Character Fitzcarraldo is the main figure, as the irrepressible Klaus Kinski would inevitably be. Fitzcarraldo is a culture loving adventurer, who has set his dreams on building a rich opera culture in the booming new rubber business town of Iquitos, in the Peruvian Amazon. As part of his quest for funds, to help build an opera house, he undertakes a dangerous upstream boat trip, on the Amazon, in search of a final parcel of rubber land to lease, and though he does not find the rubber he wants, he makes it back to Iquitos with his boat, and from the deck celebrates the first performance in Iquitos of a traveling European opera company.

Illustrative moments

Romantic From the start, Fitzcarraldo enchants us with his courtly airs, and charming behavior. He is escorting his paramour, Molly, through the beat up spars of wood that constitute the dock at Iquitos, and we delight in his rumpled white linen suit, and panama hat. By and large this man keeps his cool, his sharp eye for life and pleasure, all the way to the end of the film, through many a struggle.

Adaptable As leader of the upstream mission, Fitzcarraldo has been warned to beware of Jivaro Indians, experts with the arrow, and keen unseen eyes in the jungle. When they actually accost and then board the mission's ship, they find Fitzcarraldo and the crew at dinner. With great caution and suspicion the Indians study this small band of white men. Fitzcarraldo sets an admirable pose of wait and see, as the Indians run their fingers over his cheeks, and stroke his wild hair.

Determined. Once Fitzcarraldo has decided to try hauling the boat across the isthmus to the Ucayali, he will not be deterred. He persists against terrible odds, wins over the Indians as willing laborers, and works as hard as the next guy to make it happen!

Victorious. After his return with the boat, to Iquitos, Fitzcarraldo is at first discouraged, for he has not made himself wealthy on his upriver mission, in fact has had to sell back the boat, but with the help of Molly's brothel finances he has managed to help develop an opera house in Iquitos, and is feted, on the deck of his returning ship, by a formal performance of a traveling European opera company, which has stopped in Iquitos.

CAPTAIN

Character The captain played a crucial role in steering the ship for Fitzcarraldo, as well as for keeping Fitzcarraldo steady in difficult circumstances. The captain had participated in an earlier upriver excursion, and been one of the few survivors—he had experienced Indian attacks, and carefully urged

Fitzcarraldo not to provoke any such hostility. He remained cool in difficult situations, such as steering through narrow rapids.

Illustrative moments

Interviewed At the initial recruiting meeting, to choose a crew for the *SS Molly Aida*, Fitzcarraldo immediately appreciated the stolidity and good sense of the captain, as well as his record of previous experience. The two got along well, partly for their personality differences.

Challenged The captain was aware of the dangers of an upstream mission, and of the possibility of native attack, but he proceeded carefully and warily. On the return trip to Iquitos, down the Ucayali, the boat ran into dangerous narrows, and momentarily brushed the enclosing cliffsides, but the captain steadily, and adroitly, steered between the dangers on either side.