

ASSIGNMENT #3

Werner Herzog's film, *Fitzcarraldo*, covered in the documentary *Burden of Dreams*, is quite a complex story. Such a story, taking place in the Amazon and using actual aboriginal tribe members, really speaks to the mentality of the writer and director. Both of which were Herzog himself. Despite encountering geographical and environmental complications, tribal tensions, including quarreling Indian political councils, and feuding neighboring countries, Werner and his crew remained in the Amazon, determined to make their film. Even after receiving death threats, having malicious rumors spread about them, and being forcibly removed from the jungle, Herzog refused to shut the project down. Instead, he returned thirteen months later ready and willing to continue. His belief in his film was further tested when, with forty percent of the movie shot, his two main actors dropped out. He remarks "I live my life or I end my life with this project". This is a pretty profound thought! Consider giving all you have and more to fulfill a "... dream"; this is essentially what Herzog was willing to do.

The degree of specificity given to the locations was quite interesting. Herzog's philosophy that different, more isolated settings, in this case, would bring out special capabilities in the actors and film crew was well founded. Any actor will tell you, the better the background or location, the easier it is to become the character, making one's performance more believable. Similarly, the said performance may not have been achievable without a specific visual or point of reference present within the isolated location. By the same token, Werner's decision to make characters of elements in the surrounding environment, by waiting for specific natural lighting at the end of the day, really created an atmosphere for the story to unfold.

Herzog was very comical, often laughing at himself, yet sincere in his actions. He was very appreciative of all involved and very fair with his treatment of the aboriginals. I thoroughly appreciated his respect for and recognition of the Indians that helped him make his film. Furthermore, I was thrilled to hear that Herzog was not only paying them twice what they would regularly earn, but he had also planned on helping them procure the legal title to a tract of jungle just across the river. This land would prove to be more beneficial for the tribe than even the money. Aboriginals are fascinating people with rich languages, histories, beliefs, traditions, etc. For them, survival is of utmost importance. They're not worried about the latest gadget or fashion trend, they are what we used to be; what we've lost touch with. Because of this, we should admire them, not condemn them. It's unfortunate that these cultural sensitivities are not shared by everyone, despite the standards of common morality.

Herzog was most definitely a risk taker, in all aspects of this film. This kind of unwavering spirit is extremely beneficial when it comes to accomplishing a mission.

However, I don't agree with him putting the Indian's lives in jeopardy. Even though he took precautions to keep his people safe, he still had their lives in his hands. As a filmmaker, I obviously recognize how important it is to get the best shot possible. That being said, putting so many people in danger would be hard to justify to myself, especially if they didn't know or understand the risks they were taking; this was not the case in *Fitzcarraldo*. Thankfully nothing happened to Herzog, his crew, or the Indians.

Herzog compares film, as a way of touching people's lives, to poetry and literature. He states that filmmakers are better able to articulate these ideas into visuals, thereby making the viewer see or think a different way. I must say that I agree that films change people's perspectives of the world around them. However, I don't think that he gives the power of film enough credit. I make it a point to watch the expressions of people and to hear their chatter when they exit a movie. It's not just because they enjoyed the movie, it's because they were made to feel or experience things that they may not have known previously. His recognition of film as a means of changing the future is glimpsed, even through his denial of knowing how. Herzog states that films are "illusionist work", and that there is a language being transmitted through every image we see; almost always inadequately. Interestingly enough, he claims this epidemic of inadequate images is comparable to poverty and disease, as well as other evils plaguing the world. While I agree with a large portion of what he says, I highly doubt that most people, outside the entertainment industry, would take him seriously.

Herzog's love of film is only amplified by his decision to actually eat his shoe. He states during his speech that, although this publicity stunt was made to support *Gates of Heaven*, he was doing it as a means of encouraging future filmmakers to take risks and to get their movie made; essentially by any means necessary. Thus, he advocated for a seemingly guerilla-like approach to filmmaking. Just before eating his shoe, he tells the audience that stealing, cheating, and breaking and entering is an acceptable way to fulfill their dreams, to get their movie made. As romantic a notion as this is, obviously this thought process can, in actuality, prevent you from making your movie and land you in a great deal of trouble. Being sued, jailed, and fined are likely outcomes to this kind of behavior, however, if you get the shot or gain exposure for your movie, then, at least in Herzog's mind, it was worth it.

In spite of the unsavory nature of guerilla filmmaking, there's something to be said for its simplicity. Films modeled after this idea, generally independently made and consisting of low budgets and skeleton crews, make use of the items present in the surrounding environment. Needless to say, there is quite an advantage to this approach. Especially for first time filmmakers, who do not yet have the financial backing of a studio.

No one can deny that Murphy's Law prevailed throughout the shooting of *Fitzcarraldo*, however, no one can deny Herzog's passion and determination to complete it either. His doubt in the project, as it was falling apart around him, didn't stop him from

continuing the journey. Having seen what transpired during the shoot, the fact that he maintained faith in the movie was incredibly inspiring! He has a very nonchalant way about him, perhaps it is this element of his personality that allowed him to take the setbacks in stride, postponing but never canceling any shoot. Werner also has a very no-holds-bars type personality, as he often promised to put himself in harm's way to validate his crew or to conjure support for his or another's project. In any case, I think he would agree, as many others would, that it's more satisfying, having been through an ordeal, to come out on the other side victorious. And that is just what Herzog did. In spite of being constantly at odds with everything around him, he achieved what most people said couldn't be done. Ignoring the naysayers resulted in the completion of the movie and, much to our appreciation, a stirring example of what can happen if a filmmaker strives to triumph over the seemingly impossible. Furthermore, Herzog's actions prove that if you truly want something, or believe in it badly enough, then you'll be willing to do anything necessary to either obtain it or support it.