Werner Herzog’s Guerilla Filmmaking

Cole Oeste

On a traditional Hollywood film, production occurs over a set period of time which is predetermined, located upon sets but also sometimes on location shooting, where areas of a certain environment are arranged to be filmed at in a hasty and efficient manner. A typical director follows the production schedule, shoots what needs to be shot, and moves on. If something goes wrong with the on location shoot, such as a location no longer being available, sometimes the producers and the studio will choose to shoot on a set instead, or change the script entirely to avoid needing the on location sequence. If something goes wrong with an actor where they can no longer play the role, the studio will attempt to recast, or in some cases, put the film into turnaround, or cancel production entirely. There are some directors out there that are not at the whim of a studio or a producer, who see their project to completion no matter what, who will follow their film into the depths of hell if it means seeing it reach completion. One such director is Werner Herzog.

This man wrote and directed his own film, and battled everything possible to see it get made. He was so passionate and dedicated to his vision that he saw his film shuffle producers and several leading cast members, had to reshoot a quarter of the film, lower production costs, and deal with native uprisings and a civil war. It took 5 years to get Fitzcaraldo made, and it seems that Herzog’s perspective is, “get the film made, whatever it takes to make what’s in my brain a reality”. He struggled emotionally getting himself to a place where he could push on, as the constant delays and production issues wore on his spirit. But mentally he reasons that if he cannot make his dream come true, if we gives up, then what’s the point of anything? It doesn’t matter if one has to cut corners or bend the rules, giving up is not an option. Failure is not an option. The man is all passion and drive and love for his craft.

Archetypes in Cast Away

The film that bares the most similarities to the one I’d like to write out of the six films I watched is easily Robert Zemeckis’ Cast Away (2000). It’s a film about a man who becomes trapped on an island in the middle of the ocean, and fights for years to figure out how to survive and eventually escape and return home.

The protagonist of Cast Away, Chuck Noland, is similar in some ways to the prototypical hero of the “Hero’s Journey”, who begins his story in the realm of the norm before receiving a literal call to adventure, before crossing over into the realm of adventure, where he braves a series of obstacles in an attempt to get back. In some of these stories, the Hero is portrayed as this relatable every day character with no flaws, whereas here, Chuck is character who is imperfect, who is a workaholic, who has a decent relationship with his girlfriend but isn’t paying her the time or attention she deserves, who learns the value of living in the moment and living life instead of being married to his job. He battles many things on his journey towards the revelations of fundamental truths, which is a traditional idea included in every epic story.

An additional deviation from the traditional Hero’s Journey is that Chuck is fighting an internal struggle rather than an external one. He knows he must leave the island in order to return to his life, but is still dependent on the island for food, shelter, water. He has no superhuman abilities. He doesn’t battle to save a kingdom, only himself.

Another character archetype explored in the film is the “Hunting Group of Companions” or in this case, one companion, as Chuck’s primary confidant and friend throughout the film is his volleyball, Wilson. He fills in the C3PO and R2D2 role, or the Samwise Gamgee, if you will. The character who supports the protagonist through thick and thin and sometimes provides comic relief.

Helen Hunt’s character Kelly fills in the Penelope role from the Greek Odyssey, the woman who waits for her husband to return home after being lost in the realm of adventure. A difference here is that she makes an attempt to move on after her husband is presumed dead, whereas Penelope remained in waiting on Ithaca, which bares more of a similarity to my film “Up There”, where Zoe continues to wait for Matt even though she is nearly convinced he’s not coming back.

My film will focus on the portion of the very end of the film Cast Away, where it’s more about the Hero’s return and inability to fit back in with society, his alienation from everything, then about the journey itself. My film uses the Hero’s journey but examines a different aspect not normally explored in these kinds of stories, especially by making the protagonist the woman left behind instead of the Hero himself.