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A T E L I N E S

Art of Darkness

ALTO RIO MAYO, PERU

The Amazon River system carries one-fifth of the river water of the planet, and for that reason alone it is probably worth our interest. Even more arresting, though, are the continuing attempts to reorder this vast and unforgiving region. Werner Herzog, the German director whose newest film, *Fitzcarraldo*, earned him the Best Director award at Cannes, has provided the most recent lesson in the dangers of Western ambition in Amazonia. The lesson lies less in the film itself than in the story behind its production.

Herzog's film chronicles the life of Carlos Fitzcarrald (originally Fitzgerald), a Nineteenth Century Peruvian rubber baron of Irish descent. Fitzcarrald, like Herzog, was obsessed by art; he wanted to bring civilization to the Amazon in the form of an opera house elegant enough to attract Caruso. To get the money for the venture, he hit upon the idea of transporting an iron ship to a river hitherto inaccessible to commercial transport. The scheme, which ultimately proved fruitless, required the labor of almost a thousand workers and cost several hundred Indians their lives. For Fitzcarrald, no means were too barbarous to realize his dream of civilization.

To make the film, Herzog had to overcome Indian attack, defection of the principal actors, and the reluctance of a 320-ton steamship to ascend a forty-degree slope in the heart of the jungle. "*Fitzcarraldo* or death," the director was quoted as saying during the course of the production, and by all accounts it was a close contest. To complete the project Herzog had to commit some of the same transgressions as the film's protagonist.

Foremost among them were his dealings with the Aguaruna Indians, the native group that was to provide the extras and construction crews for the film. Things started off cordially enough, but as the work progressed resentment toward the filmmakers grew. The Aguaruna, like most Indians of the Peruvian Amazon, are extremely sensitive about land rights, since the government (with the assistance of U.S. development agencies) has encouraged landless peasants to colonize Indian-occupied "virgin" lands in the jungle. When Herzog's crew began to construct an entire village on Aguaruna land, the Indians became understandably nervous.

To make things worse, Herzog apparently insisted on negotiating with residents of the Aguaruna village immediately affected, and not with the leaders of the re-



FLOWER FILMS / MAUREEN GOSLING

Extras and the 320-ton ship from Herzog's all-consuming '*Fitzcarraldo*.'

cently organized tribal council. These leaders resented the director's unauthorized intrusion into their territory and mobilized support against him. Herzog, meanwhile, sought protection from the local militia, thus setting the stage for violent confrontation.

In December 1979, a large group of Aguaruna men burned the set to the ground, taking care not to injure anyone or damage valuable equipment. By this time the Indians had also contacted such groups as Cultural Survival, Inc., of Cambridge, Massachusetts, which was quick to denounce Herzog's "ethnocentrism, self-righteousness, arrogance, and myopia." In retrospect, some of the accusations leveled at Herzog seem a trifle overwrought. Nevertheless, the director's single-minded concern with his project made him all too ready to bully the Indians whose cause he ostensibly hoped to advance through the film. In an interview with the Peruvian magazine *Marka*, Herzog responded to this accusation by remarking that as a director his concern is with "collective dreams, the nightmares of a people," rather than with their everyday needs and aspirations.

Years overdue and millions over budget, Herzog's film was finally completed. Although it may prove to be an artistic success, one cannot help but suspect that Herzog failed to come to terms with the Amazon itself, which he called "vile and base, full of obscenity."

Herzog's inability to understand Amazonia is not unusual. The leaders of Amazonian nations and their sponsors in the developed world have historically been possessed by a desire to impose order on the apparent chaos of the region. Despite ecologists' warnings about the fragility of tropical soils—their tendency to transform themselves to lateritic brick when tilled by temperate zone agricultural methods—some international agency is always ready to fund projects that seek to turn Colombian, Ecuadorian, or Peruvian forests into Kansas wheatfields. Only a few months ago, the U.S. Agency for International Development was preparing to support a program to establish large agricultural colonies in what it called Peruvian "wilderness." Independent biologists and social scientists on the scene, however, reported that the site was already home to Indians and other settlers, and its fragile resources were, if anything, over-exploited. USAID first responded to these reports by ordering a reassessment of the project. Now, however, the agency is forging ahead with it, having bowed to pressure from Peruvian officials and a Reagan Administration anxious to improve relations with Peru in the wake of the Falklands war.

Nor are spendthrift governments the only ones to lose their grip on reality in Amazonia. In the 1920s, Henry Ford embarked on the disastrous Fordlandia project in Brazil, an attempt to use temperate-zone

farming methods to grow rubber trees. Ford's plantations were devastated by a plant disease that is almost impossible to control in large clear-cuts. But his fiasco seems modest next to Daniel Ludwig's mammoth Jari project, an experiment in wood pulp production and agribusiness in northern Brazil. The project lost so much money that Ludwig was recently forced to sell it to a Brazilian consortium. Not all business ventures in the Amazon have been so unprofitable, however. Such multinationals as Goodyear, Volkswagen, and Armour are making money on Brazilian cattle ranches, at least for now. The ravages

of sun, wind, and rain on the newly created rangelands could soon render the soil useless.

Andean people have long believed in the existence of ghouls called *pistacos*, which look like Europeans. These beings lie in wait for unwary Indian travelers, and after killing them, extract their body fat to grease the factories of North America. It is surely no accident that belief in these *gringo* vampires has begun to penetrate the Amazon as development projects have intensified there.

An Aguaruna man I spoke to after the attack on Herzog's movie set said many In-

dians believed Herzog's crew intended to trick them into simulating a battle scene, during which they would be killed for the benefit of the film. Given the damage that has already been inflicted on Amazonian Indians in the name of progress, it is hard to dismiss these beliefs as mere superstition. They are, in fact, all too accurate metaphors for the nature of development in Amazonia.

—MICHAEL F. BROWN
(Michael F. Brown, who lived with the Aguaruna for two years while doing anthropological field work, is an assistant professor of anthropology at Williams College.)

Make War, Not Love

PINE BLUFF, ARKANSAS

In an isolated corner of a large military base on the Arkansas River, a factory is being readied to produce American nerve gas for the first time since 1969.

The gently rolling countryside of south-central Arkansas seems an incongruous home for one of the most savage weapons in the American arsenal. The 15,000-acre Army facility where the gas will be made is mostly wooded. Wildlife abounds: Deer are plentiful and peregrine falcon, bald eagle, cougar, and other endangered species have been spotted nearby.

The natural beauty is interrupted by about 800 Army structures and some old dump sites, thirty-one of them hazardous. The cost of cleanup will run to tens of millions of dollars.

The new nerve gas assignment will expose the area to still more environmental dangers. It will bring few new jobs and has already brought infamy to Pine Bluff. Yet the local Chamber of Commerce stands full-force behind the project; so do the district's Congressional representatives, the local newspaper, and the city government.

Their support says something about the perilous state of the economy, even in the Sunbelt. It also says something about the character of Pine Bluff, a city of 58,000 that sits about eight miles down the road from the Arsenal. Pine Bluff was a cotton and railroad center that grew too fast. Today, a few charming old homes remain—like the girlhood mansion of Martha Mitchell—but the city is dominated by a hideous sprawl of gas stations, fast-food joints, and shopping centers that spill helter-skelter onto the rural landscape. Pine Bluff is an impoverished community: 30 per cent of the county population is below national poverty standards, according to a 1977 study. Unemployment runs about 10 per cent.

To make the best of the town, the Chamber of Commerce made up bumper stickers



JAN FAUST

a few years ago boasting that "Pine Bluff Loves People." Statistics belie the boast. A recent Rand McNally study of the quality of life in 277 cities rated Pine Bluff 275th. Its murder rate was fourth among the cities studied, and its rape rate was first. Now, for the sake of a few construction jobs, the city is rallying to become the nerve gas manufacturing center of the Western world.

The Pine Bluff Arsenal began producing incendiary grenades in 1942. Now the Pentagon has chosen it to build a new, supposedly safer, binary nerve gas munition, and \$53 million has been requested to finish outfitting the factory in 1983.

The binary chemical munitions are composed of two separate, sealed containers of chemicals that do not mix to form the deadly nerve agent until the munition has been fired. At Pine Bluff, only one of the components will be installed in the munition. The other will be stored elsewhere and added to the shell at the battle site.

Proponents say these weapons are safer than existing ones, many of which are stored in insulated igloos at the Pine Bluff Arsenal. Opponents of the binary program say there is no need to lavish funds on new, un-

tested gas weapons when the present stockpile is adequate and renewed manufacturing—after a thirteen-year hiatus—will only alienate our allies and fuel a chemical arms race with the Soviets.

While Pine Bluff's business community embraces the assignment, major chemical companies have turned down solicitations to provide the raw materials for it—apparently for public relations reasons. *Fortune* magazine reported recently that only five small companies showed interest in the job. None of them had ever made gas before.

If that didn't give Pine Bluff leaders pause, an environmental impact statement reported that one of the components to be used in manufacture, QL, reacts with sulphur and sulphur dioxide to form a toxic agent. Just six miles upwind from the Arsenal stands Arkansas Power and Light Company's largest coal-fired generating plant, emitting sulphur and sulphur dioxide. Army officials say there is no way the fumes from the plant could make the carefully contained QL into a nerve agent. Nonetheless, the environmental report notes that even "emissions of sulphur dioxide and sulphur from coal stockpiles could react with QL to form toxic chemical agents."

Such concerns led Senator David Pryor of Arkansas, usually a tentative and cautious politician, to become an early leader of the Senate effort to kill renewed nerve gas spending. But his opposition only earned him the wrath of the Pine Bluff business boosters. When he attacked the first proposal for renewed nerve gas spending in 1980, the Chamber of Commerce fired off a telegram warning him about the risks of being a softy on issues of international warfare.

"The free world has already had its Neville Chamberlain approach to barbaric aggression," the Chamber wrote. "The results of this type thinking, as you are well aware, resulted in the loss of millions of lives."

—THOMAS K. HAMBURGER
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