

film review

Up the Lazy River

By Josef Woodard, September 28, 2006

Aguirre: The Wrath of God

Klaus Kinski, Helena Rojo, Del Negro, and Ruy Guerra star in a film written and directed by Werner Herzog.

Reviewed by Josef Woodard

Viewing Werner Herzog's weirdly hypnotic 1972 film reminds us of his irreverent genius and vision, and also the spotty track record of achieving his loftiest ideals. Matters of history flit about the film, like the spider monkeys scampering around the raft in the chilling final shot, while mad Aguirre (Klaus Kinski, in one of his most spookily cool performances) babbles irrationally about his planned conquest of the New Spain.

Drawn loosely from the diary of the monk Gaspar de Carvajal, Herzog's film tells the true story of a 1560 Spanish expedition from Perú up the Amazon, in search of the mythic El Dorado. The official leader's orders to turn back are countered by the crazed Aguirre, a mutineer with visions of grand material spoils and emboldened by the Catholic God's grace. Nature and the stealthy natives have other ideas in mind.

As in other, later Herzog films, including *Fitzcarraldo*, the director grapples with the themes of lust for power, adventurism, and ultimate futility as the expedition confronts the unforgiving obstacles in pursuit of gold and glory. The film is at once oddly elegant and rough-hewn, its raw edges intact but with deadpan humor and languid pacing giving the whole misadventure the quality of a historical tract filtered through a dream.

After what initially seems like heroism and bravery, Aguirre's mutiny yields to a grimmer reality of death and hopelessness, and the film becomes a mind-altering experiment in ennui on the water, punctuated by banal terror and dry humor.

Throughout his uneven but often compelling filmography, Herzog has tended to shoot his fiction films like documentaries and vice versa. When he's on — and this is one of his most masterful films — Herzog demonstrates both a strong desire to reinvent the rules of cinema, and to chronicle the fatal folly of our species. And, somehow, he does it in sardonic, entertaining fashion.