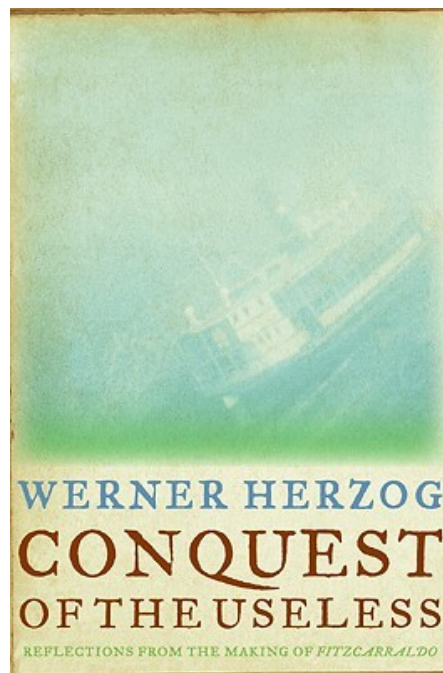




Conquest of the Useless: Reflections from the Making of Fitzcarraldo

Werner Herzog , Krishna Winston (Translator)

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Werner Herzog (*Grizzly Man*) is one of the most revered and enigmatic filmmakers of our time, and *Fitzcarraldo* is one of his most honored and admired films. More than just Herzog's journal of the making of the monumental, problematical motion picture, which involved, among other things, major cast changes and reshoots, and the hauling (without the use of special effects) of a 360-ton steamship over a mountain, *Conquest of the Useless* is a work of art unto itself, an Amazonian fever dream that emerged from the delirium of the jungle. With fascinating observations about crew and players—including Herzog's lead, the somewhat demented internationally renowned star Klaus Kinski—and breathtaking insights into the filmmaking process that are uniquely Werner Herzog, *Conquest of the Useless* is an eye-opening look into the mind of a cinematic master.

Conquest of the Useless: Reflections from the Making of Fitzcarraldo Details

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From Reader Review Conquest of the Useless: Reflections from the Making of Fitzcarraldo for online ebook

Lee says

Here's something to do before the end of the month: read this book and watch "Fitzcarraldo," "Aguirre: Wrath of God," the Herzog documentary about Klaus Kinski called "My Best Fiend," and the Les Blank documentary about the making of "Fitzcarraldo" called "The Burden of Dreams." A highly recommended crash course in Herzogian ecstatic beauty . . . At one point, a diary entry begins with a hilarious understatement, something like "Profoundly unreconciled to nature." But the writing is so natural and the descriptions of the jungle and mountains and fog and insects and, well, nature in general are profoundly evocative. Like all Herzog documentaries, you also have to sort of treat it like fiction. Mick Jagger, who was in the film early on, is portrayed as pleasantly impish. The New York Times review was idiotic, wishing for more logistic/technical information about certain shots, or Coppola's role etc. The reviewer wanted characters who appeared once to be introduced and appear again, as in a novel or non-fiction, not a journal -- he wanted a non-Herzogian non-fiction, essentially. But this thing reeks of Herzog everywhere as he charts the athletic/spiritual endurance required of pulling off an ambition like this, and also the singular sort of obsessed perspective that allows it to happen in the first place. Also, it's real funny. Dozens of LOLs, often at audacious, over-the-top descriptions, or sudden crazy jumps from sentence to sentence. "Seen from the plane, the sheer expanse of the jungle is terrifying; no one who has not been there can picture it. We do not need virtuosos of syntax." And yet on every page Werner proves himself a virtuoso of seeing and describing what he's seen. This book is almost more about language than any particular film - Herzog's sentences seem to me sharper and funnier and more peculiarly individuated than those of most contemporary prose writers. Plus, this book seems to prove that what's inside the artist comes outside the artist. Hope he has a journal like this for Stroszek, too - another highly recommended movie (if you're a Joy Division fan you probably know this as the movie Ian Curtis watched before he hanged himself).

Mariel says

I'm glad that I've not felt that compelled to HAVE to do something. But I kinda relate in feeling sometimes like people around me don't give a shit and I'm some crazy dreamer chick with a crazy dreamy look in her eyes.

But I also kinda wish that I had those visions in my head that had to come out in words and images. I've not felt the kind of righteous rightness that burdened me to create. Maybe that's why I almost never remember my dreams...

Fucking crazy stuff. I loved it. Like the rest of life was seen through a story focus lens, splitting details away for their fevered qualities.

I don't think the stories were contrived. If others wouldn't have seen it that way, well, they weren't Herzog.

I love the Destroyer song "Virgin with a Memory". It goes "Was it the movie or the making of Fitzcarraldo?" Right-on, Dan Bejar!

I forgot to mention the birds! All of the other reviews detail a terrific entry from Conquest of the Useless (damn now I can't talk about swimming with piranhas). I loved all of the tidbits about parrots and I'd try and

guess what kinds they were based on the descriptions he gave. There were amazonians and caiques (my favorite kind of bird, pretty much)! I'd lose my mind in the jungle. I'd make a caique my king (and he would be a playful god). Only I couldn't go all Heart of Darkness and rip the monkey's (or bird's) head off either (that'd be like Steerpike from Gormenghast, too. Poor monkeys. Weren't those songs by ex-Genesis members enough???)

Nancy Oakes says

<http://www.nonfictionrealstuff.com/20...>

As Werner Herzog tells us in his preface, this book is not a collection of "reports on the actual filming," and it is not a journal, "except in a very general sense." He refers to it as "inner landscapes, born of the delirium of the jungle," but then says that he's not sure if that's really it either. The book covers the period from June 1979 through November 1981 during the making of *Fitzcarraldo* and while it is filled with some of the struggles he endured while trying to get his movie off the ground, it is also a deeply personal account, suffused with his observations about the Amazon jungle, its people, the rivers, and his own relationship with nature, trying to find some insight into it all while trying to maintain a sense of calm as the leader of the enterprise.

One thing that I discovered in reading this book is that there are a number of similarities between Herzog and his character Fitzcarraldo, who is more than once referred to in the film as "the conquistador of the useless." Both are dreamers, and both in their own way are lunatics, compelled by their visions. At some point Herzog notes that his project and character have become identical," and certainly, there is no greater truth in this book.

And while it's not a tell-all sort of thing, if you're interested in such details as his frustration with Klaus Kinski, or what it was like to work with Mick Jagger and Claudia Cardinale, that's here too, but this book reaches much deeper.

highly recommended, especially if you've seen *Fitzcarraldo* and *Burden of Dreams*.

Jim says

One of my favorite films of the 1980s was Werner Herzog's **Fitzcarraldo**, about a 19th century Peruvian rubber baron who decides to bring the opera to the jungle city of Iquitos. In order to do this, he must find a way of moving a largish steamship over a ridge that separates two adjacent rivers, the Camisea and the Urubamba.

Naturally, such an idea is madness on the face of it. But Herzog did it, and the result is a film production that will continue to amaze people as long as films are being watched.

Almost equal to the film, however, is Herzog's journal of the making of the film, *Conquest of the Useless: Reflections from the Making of Fitzcarraldo*. Although in form the book is theoretically a documentation of an insanely difficult film production, it is as much a series of vignettes of life in the jungle, dreams, tales of encounters with snakes, spiders, Peruvian Indians, strange fish and birds, jungle rot, illnesses and wounds, and whatnot. Here is a brief example:

When I tossed a cigarette butt, still glowing, into a metal sewer grating, suddenly something like a snake shot up out of the damp, black sewer, seized the butt, dropped it again at once, and disappeared just as fast. It was a very large frog.

Here is another typical instance of jungle life:

Our kitchen crew slaughtered our last four ducks. While they were still alive, Julian plucked their neck feathers before chopping off their heads on the execution block. The albino turkey, that vain creature, the survivor of so many roast chickens and ducks transformed into soup, came over to inspect, gobbling and displaying, used his ugly feet to push one of the beheaded ducks as it lay there on the ground bleeding and flapping its wings into what he thought was a proper position, and making gurgling sounds while his bluish red wattles swelled, he mounted the dying duck and copulated with it.

There were also many descriptions of problems with the cast and crew, particularly with Klaus Kinski, who played the lead. After one of his crazier tantrums, a number of Campos Indians came up to Herzog and whispered whether he wanted to have the actor killed. Kinski got wind of what was going on and immediately died down.

This book is a classic and tells me more about the area around the Peruvian headwaters of the Amazon than I have seen in any other source. But then Herzog had made two films in the area. In addition to **Fitzcarraldo**, there was the equally excellent **Aguirre, the Wrath of God**, also starring Kinski. Also, this book gives me a good reason for never having wanted to become a film director: I would have gone stark raving mad and would have had to be killed by the Indians out of spite.

Spiros says

Fear and Loathing in the Peruvian Jungle: Werner Herzog's Pursuit of his Dream.

I feel that it is a fairly safe statement that never has a film production been so fraught by so many factors: political hurdles, extortionate local bureaucrats, wars between indigenous tribes, plane crashes, torrential down pours, drought, dried up funding, drunken extras, drunken crew, drunken actors, snakes, separte media circuses involving Mick Jagger and Claudia Cardinale, snakes, and Klaus Kinski, to name just a few. Herzog battles against his head of production, against the jungle, against illness, and against gruesome injuries to himself and his crew: "Mauch said he could not take any more, that he was going to faint, and I told him to go ahead. Then he thought he was going to shit his pants from the pain, but he could not decide between the two options, and in the end did neither."

Herzog, despite a prediliction for filming in extreme environments, is not a wide-eyed lover of nature: "The jungle, existing exclusively in the present, is certainly subject to time, but remains forever ageless. Any concept of justice would be antithetical to all this. But is there justice in the desert, either? Or in the oceans? And in the depths? Life in the sea must be pure hell, an infinite hell of constant and ever-present danger, so unbearable that in the course of evoltion some species - including Homo sapiens - crawled, fled, onto some clods of firm land, the future continents."

Somewhat surprisingly, a confessed fear of spiders runs through this journal; as I expected, an almost pathological loathing of chickens pervades the entries. Unsurprisingly, it would seem that Huerequeque didn't have to do any acting: he played himself. A leit-motif running through the journals is the bizarre quality of the news from civilization that filters down into the jungle: the assassination attempt on Ronald Reagan, the account of the Japanese surgeon who remved his own appendix, the computer in Miami which sent a dilatory insurance client 24,000 notices of late payment of a monthly premium. Juxtaposed to the shambolic film production, these intimations of entropy from beyond the trees have a tendancy to make

Herzog's travails a little more quotidian than they might otherwise seem.

Pedro says

Very good. The next is "walking on ice".

Karen says

What else can you do but give this one two thumbs up? The man hauled a steamship over a mountain in the Amazon. There's nothing about that that isn't ridiculous, amazing, destructive, damaging, obsessive, incomprehensible, baffling, gratuitous, pointless, staggering, horrible, laughable, great.

I've seen My Best Fiend, Herzog's documentary about his relationship with Klaus Kinski, which contains a lot of footage of the making of *Fitzcarraldo*, the ship-hauling movie. Reading his diaries from the movie shoot recalled many of those scenes--Kinski raving and screaming, Herzog looking drawn and dour, animals shrieking, machinery breaking in impressive and dangerous ways, a general aura of doom.

I remember Herzog narrating in his dolorous Teutonic accent over the sounds of jungle creatures, something like, "People think the jungle is beautiful. It isn't beautiful. It's in agony. The birds...the animals, they are in agony." I was ready to believe him, but after reading his diaries it makes even more sense. Everything that can go wrong, goes wrong. There are military coups, political battles, bad media attention, deaths and injuries, disease, fussy American actors, equipment thefts, droughts, floods, alligators, and angst. So much angst. The jungle is not a happy place.

All that said, this is an amazing record of an amazing work. Herzog never tries to explain the meaning of his vision--the ship hauled over the mountaintop--but he also never compromises it. He works doggedly, miserably, past the point of all reason, to make the movie he wants. It's as much an inspiration as a kind of warning. Parents, don't let your kids grow up to be filmmakers. Or if you do, make sure they have strong constitutions.

Shane Bordoli says

Well, so good I feel I should write one of my rare reviews for it to maybe inspire someone else to read this little known work. A book by Werner is a rare beast and well worth hunting down. The film and the escapades involved in making it are the stuff of legend and have been covered in several documentaries; here we get Werner's experiences with such style and content that is quite unlike anything else I have read. It's form is simply a diary of the on location filming of one of his classic collaborations with Klaus Kinsky, but contains so much more, or rather so much less. Its fairly rare to get any mention of actual filming, with Werner documenting his day to day experiences of trying to film on a shakey budget in the middle of the Amazon jungle.

There are so many classic sentences here that make it a classic book as far as I'm concerned.

Boyd says

Two great things about *Conquest of the Useless*

1) Werner Herzog writes exactly the same way he talks, so it's no trouble at all to imagine him personally reading this book to you in that trademark flat Bavarian drawl. It would make the perfect accompaniment to a midnight road trip through a Louisiana bayou where you ran out of gas, sank into mud up to your wheel wells, were bitten by several cottonmouth moccasins and then had your throat slashed by swamp-dwelling sociopaths. Werner Herzog would STILL have bigger problems than you did.

2) Also Werner Herzog can't stand nature and isn't ashamed to tell you all about it at length and in a tone of horrified fascination. You have to respect that. Oh, sure, he'll pause periodically and go through the motions of extolling, e.g., the beauty of the Amazonian night sky (though in "Burden of Dreams" he even criticized that), but we all know what he's really thinking: Get me the fuck out of here! Every pig is a bag of bones, every dog has three legs, every spider is the size of Saturn, and everything everywhere is drenched and rotting and infected and teetering on the verge of death.

The tale of the movie shoot is really great and all that, and I loved it. Still, anyone could dine out on stories about those little mountainside boat problems and trying to handle the head case that was Klaus Kinski. It takes a real man, though, to bitch about The Majestic World Around Us.

Jeff Jackson says

His documentaries are still strong, but Herzog the person has started to lapse into self-parody thanks to Youtube readings of "Green Eggs and Ham," etc. It's easy to imagine his journal chronicling the torturous making of "Fitzcarraldo" would be chock full of madly hilarious Germanic ravings and pronouncements on the maniacal cruelty of nature and hairbrained insanity of the universe - but in fact this is a nuanced, affecting, microscopically observant, and sometimes visionary account of the inner and outer landscapes Herzog navigated during his epic filmmaking project in the jungle.

Those who have read the equally wonderful "Of Walking In Ice" know that Herzog is a superb stylist and his written voice is far richer than his relatively one-dimensional public persona. These entries are dense with physical and poetic detail, crafted to capture at least a sideways glance of those sensations which tend to elude language. As the book progresses, it would be helpful to be familiar with the movie but it's not strictly necessary. These dark ruminations and unflinching observations are their own reward.

And for those who crave the crazier Herzog, here are some prime bits of jungle madness:

"At the market I ate a piece a grilled monkey - it looked like a naked child."

"Our speedboat is stranded with gasket failure. The boatman forgot to take along spare parts and tools and is now waiting for a miraculous intervention that might revive the engine. Sweat, storm clouds overhead, sleeping dogs. There is a smell of stale urine. In my soup, ants and bugs were swimming among the globules of fat. Lord Almighty, send us an earthquake."

"For a moment the feeling crept over me that my work, my vision, is going to destroy me and for a fleeting moment I let myself take a long, hard look at myself, something I would not otherwise do - out of instinct, on principle, out of self-preservation - look at myself with objective curiosity to see whether my vision has not

destroyed me already. I found it comforting to note that I was still breathing."

"Seen from the plane, the sheer expanse of jungle is terrifying: no one who has not been there can picture it. We do not need virtuosos of syntax."

El says

Werner Herzog is one of the greatest filmmakers in cinematic history. Anyone who says otherwise is, well... Wrong. Seriously. Go watch *Grizzly Man* and come back and tell me I'm wrong. That shit is crazy.

He also did this one film few people have heard of, *Fitzcarraldo*. During the filming of that movie in South America, Herzog kept a journal of his everyday experiences. Later he turned those recollections into a book, *Conquest of the Useless*. Santa loves me and gave it to me for Christmas, so it's about time I got around to reading it.

Herzog's recollections cover a gamut of information - the socioeconomic situations of the countries in which he was filming, the politics, the weather, the wildlife, his crew and film-buddies. The Hollywood gossip factor was pretty high here, from Jason Robards (initially chosen to play Fitzcarraldo until he freaked the eff out about being in the jungle all the time and had to go bye-bye) to Mick Jagger (whose role in the film was ultimately cut, sadly). Some of my favorite passages from the book involves those two particular crazies:

Herzog on Robards: "Robards is being flown out today. [...] I had seen Robards at the crack of dawn, when it was actually still quite dark, hurrying through the camp without his dentures, his hair flying and his eyes crazed, like King Lear through the deserted chambers in his castle." (page 130)

Herzog on Jagger: "We shot some footage with Mick and the little Indian boy who is called McNamara in the film, and both of them did such a good job that the team broke into applause. During the scene Mick was bitten on the shoulder by one of the monkeys and laughed so uproariously about it afterward that it sounded like a donkey braying. Whenever we take a break he distracts me with clever little lectures on English dialects and the development of the language since the late Middle Ages." (page 131)

You can't make that kind of stuff up. You have to be there. I love me some Jason Robards, don't get me wrong. But that man has always been at least 900 years old. He's like Ray Bradbury. Were they ever young? But I can totally picture Robards going around stark-ass crazy. And Jagger - well, whoda thunk that he'd converse about language on some downtime? I love it.

There's also a bit about Herzog fishing piranhas out of the water and trying to convince his crew it's okay to swim there now. They didn't believe him, even after he got in the water himself to illustrate. Dude, I don't know about you, but the piranhas I've seen at the Pittsburgh Zoo and Aquarium are nothing to be trifled with.

(Which then led me to think about the fish in my high school Biology class called Oscar. He wasn't a piranha but I swear each day that damn fish got just a little bigger and scarier-looking.)

Piranhas are scary. Which is probably why I haven't seen the movie yet. It's not like they're the evolved sting rays like in that classic book I read a few years ago, *Natural Selection*. Piranhas will beat your ass, even in 3-D.

(This review was written in a sober state.)

Steev Hise says

This is a wonderful book. If you're a big Herzog fan like I am, or interested in filmmaking, or Peru, or just interested in reading the journals of a really unique artist and thinker, trying to do the impossible in the middle of a jungle, you will probably like this book. I'm not sure who else would like it for sure if they don't fall into one or more of those categories.

This book covers a lot of ground. It's some descriptive logging of daily work on a film set, but it's much much more. Many entries are unrelated directly to the business of making his film, but rather is just strange anecdotes of the bizarre stuff that happens on the periphery of the operation, or just surreal observations that Herzog makes about plants or animals or landscapes that he sees. he really has a unique outlook on nature and the world in general. It's super super interesting.

Kit Fox says

So, if like me, you've seen *Fitzcarraldo* and *Burden of Dreams* and *My Beast Fiend* in addition to having read *Kinski Uncut*, is this still worth checking out? The answer is an emphatic "yes." Yes all the way to Peru. Herzog writes the way he speaks, in his own—well I wouldn't say inimitable because people do pretty good impressions of his these days—idiosyncratic, stream-of-subconscious cadence that bounds from topic to topic with patently illuminating levels of absurdity. A dreamscape full of fist-sized jungle spiders that lie in wait in the director's shoe, impossible filming conditions that test the sanity of veteran film crews, and a half-goblin, half-genius actor whose volatile tantrums seek only to draw attention to his own creative indolence, the greatest shame of all, though, is that there isn't an audio version of this book; seriously, if someone started a kickstarter to generate funds to pay Herzog to read this book out loud, I'd put money in today. Without a doubt.

Vincent Saint-Simon says

Sirs, But More Especially Madams:

When I read this book I feel like I am touching another soul, and that soul is slapping an albino turkey.

Sd,

V

Karmologyclinic says

But in the film the geography has to be visible: two rivers that almost touch, with only a mountain ridge between them, over which the ship has to be hauled. Without that understanding the point of the story is lost says Herzog.

In the jungle things can go wrong and everything that could go wrong did, in Herzog's case. And people kept asking him, why can't we ditch the scene with the ship or fake it at least? And he replies, because there is a metaphor there, without this metaphor there is no film. So, what is the metaphor, they asked him. I don't know, I can't express it with words but it is there. And it is important, he replied.

In my opinion, the metaphor of the ship being hauled over the ridge is open, it is all inclusive, that's why it is all important. The metaphor has become in itself art. It can become anything at all in each person's mind. Whether you think it is about madness, human endurance, humanity, mortality, vanity, colonialism, the conquest of the useless, the burden of dreams you would be correct. In a very introspective moment I thought it was about the divide between conscious and unconscious mind and you know what, maybe I was right maybe I wasn't, not important. The metaphor is there for all to carry around inside them. If the fleshed out metaphor was faked, it would have lost its power. I have a feeling that in this movie Herzog has blended performance art with movie and they coexist symbiotically.

All that is to be reported is this: I took part.

Leaving my musings aside, this book, the diary Herzog kept while shooting the film, is not about the film. You will not find descriptions of how he did what and why. It is a diary of everything else that happens while they shoot this film. And you are left to wonder, how the hell did they finish shooting it, with literally everything going awry?

In the face of the obscene, explicit malice of the jungle, which lacks only dinosaurs as punctuation, I feel like a half-finished, poorly expressed sentence in a cheap novel

It is also a diary of Herzog's astute observation of landscapes and inner-scapes. Funny and vaguely dreamlike.

Once more, despite all my attempts at fending it off, a shuddering sense creeps into me of being trapped in the stanza of a strange poem, and it shakes me so violently that I glance around superstitiously to see whether anyone is watching me.

Does the monkey dream my dreams in the branches above me? I ordered a beer, and my voice sounded altered, like the voice of a parrot imitating operatic arias. The sun sank in an angry blaze. For a moment, and for the only time I think I can remember, the earth struck me as motherly, covered with a decaying forest that seemed positively humble. A large brown moth was boring into the smooth concrete floor as if it wanted to go down into the earth, and beating its wings so violently that the wooden sound it created blended with the electrical hissing and crackling of a dying fluorescent bulb overhead like a symphony from the depths of a ghastly universe, a universe readying itself for the final harvest.

You would expect a colonialism in his approach, but there is none. It struck me at how authentic his reactions and his relationship with the jungle became.

The jungle, existing exclusively in the present, is certainly subject to time, but remains forever ageless. Any concept of justice would be antithetical to all this. But is there justice in the desert, either? Or in the oceans?

And in the depths? Life in the sea must be pure hell, an infinite hell of constant and ever-present danger, so unbearable that in the course of evolution some species—including Homo sapiens—crawled, fled, onto some clods of firm land, the future continents.

I looked around, and there was the jungle, manifesting the same seething hatred, wrathful and steaming, while the river flowed by in majestic indifference and scornful condescension, ignoring everything: the plight of man, the burden of dreams, and the torments of time.

A declaration I feel I should make is that I am a big fan of Werner Herzog, I like his good stuff and I also celebrate his failures. There is meaning in them. Or I find it. The same with Cronenberg.
