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## Civilization's Aria: Film as Lore and Opera as Metaphor in Werner Herzog's *Fitzcarraldo*

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The most significant and enduring lore embraced by elites in Latin America is the division between civilization and barbarism. The separation into two Latin Americas, one civilized, that is positive and progressive, another barbaric, that is negative and regressive, has shaped the foreigner's views, as well as the self-image of the region, as has no other concept. It has spanned the five centuries from colonial domination to contemporary development controversies. This dichotomy lies at the heart of Hans Werner Herzog's film, *Fitzcarraldo*, presented as a conflict between European music and Latin American reactions to it. The result is one of the strongest filmic treatments of polarized cultures. Indeed, *Fitzcarraldo* is such a wide-ranging and complex statement that it links together three important aspects of elitelore, those dimensions involved with cinema, opera, and literature.

Cinema-lore provides a framework for viewing *Fitzcarraldo* as a historical document, "part of the customs, beliefs, ritual and social myth that must be examined if we are to begin to understand our own time as well as times gone by," because Herzog reinforces the concept of the civilized and the barbaric Latin America intellectually in a process "involving two main bodies of information, one human and one technical, both being integrated into the filmmaker's lore and both involving manipulation of the filmic process."<sup>1</sup> Herzog's illustrious reputation

<sup>1</sup> Daniel I. Geffner and James W. Wilkie, "Cinemale: *State of Siege as a Case Study*," *Journal of Latin American Lore* 2:2 (1976), 222 and 224. See this entire article for a basic conceptualization of "cinemale" (pp. 221-238).

(as well as considerable notoriety) derives from his evident obsessions, powerful themes, and historical sensitivity. He is a genuine "auteur" and thus lends himself to cinema-lore's concerns with how the filmmaker, a member of the intellectual elite, can create a self-contained statement that viewers accept as "reality."

Opera-lore furnishes a concept for understanding the terms of *Fitzcarraldo's* dichotomy between European culture and that of the Indians. An identification was formed that made opera a symbol of the advancement of Western ideas in Latin America and it came to have a particular power in the region because devotion to and knowledge of opera represented entrance into the elite and disdain for indigenous culture.<sup>2</sup> The lore which has surrounded opera created a need for the oligarchies in Argentina, Mexico, and Brazil particularly to furnish their members with the latest European music dramas and the most renowned interpreters. This image of opera's significance in Latin America reaches its height in the very turn-of-the-century setting Herzog employs in *Fitzcarraldo*.

Literature-lore demonstrates a way in which the ideas furnished by Latin American writers and *pensadores* become generalized throughout society. If those ideas are turned into a social myth, as certain ones attractive to elites are, then they achieve the status of folklore over time.<sup>3</sup> Undoubtedly no concept has had as strong an appeal as the duality of civilization and barbarism; in the course of more than a century it has passed from the exalted essays of the elite to the popular culture of the masses.

Although the basis of a conflict between a superior Europe and an inferior America developed during the periods of conquest and colonialism, the clearest and most important enunciation of the dichotomy came from the pen of the Argentine *pensador* and statesman, Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, during the early years of independence. His *Civilización y barbarie: vida de Juan Facundo Quiroga* posits a civilization equated with Europe and a barbarism inherent in the land and the people of Latin America.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> See Ronald H. Dolkart, "Elitelore at the Opera: The Teatro Colón of Buenos Aires," *Journal of Latin American Lore* 9:2 (1983), 231-250.

<sup>3</sup> See James W. Wilkie, Edna Monzón de Wilkie, and María Herrera-Sobek, "Elitelore and Folklore: Theory and a Test Case in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*," *Journal of Latin American Lore* 4:2 (1978), 183-224.

<sup>4</sup> This is the shortened title of the first edition which appeared in Santiago, Chile, in 1845; thereafter, subsequent editions during Sarmiento's lifetime emphasized Facundo first, the title now generally used for this work. See Raul Moglia's "Presentación," in Domingo F. Sarmiento, *Facundo, o civilización y barbarie en las pampas argentinas* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Peuser, 1955), pp. xiii-xiv: this text, which I have used for this article, reproduces the fourth edition of 1874.

Sarmiento wrote his classic essay with a clear political purpose in mind: to stigmatize the rule and the influence of Juan Manuel de Rosas, Argentina's national caudillo between 1829 and 1852, who had forced the writer into exile. The support for Rosas' tyranny, in Sarmiento's view, came from the savage gauchos like Facundo Quiroga, products of an untamed environment in the interior of Argentina; the opposition to dictatorship lay with the cultured elites, living in the ports connected to Europe or in the old colonial centers:

The city is the center of Argentine, Spanish, European civilization; there are the art galleries, the commercial shops, the schools and colleges, the courts, everything in short that characterizes cultured peoples . . . everything civilized in the city is kept out of (the countryside) ... the primitive life of its people (is a) life notably barbarous and static.<sup>5</sup>

Sarmiento thus gave shape to a grandiose theme of conflict. Ever since his original formulation, although Latin Americans and Latin Americanists have debated vehemently the meaning of "civilization" and of "barbarism," the dichotomy in many forms and guises has found its way into not only formal literature, but also analyses of social hierarchies, political systems, economic development, and, of course, cultural phenomena. In general, the concept of civilization in these discussions has become a code word for Europe and its modernization. As a result, because Latin America is a region dominated by vast distances and monumental geographic forms, inhabited by peoples different from those in the Old World, Europeans, from the arrival of the Spanish and Portuguese, have insisted on the need to remake the region in their own image. Of all the areas of Latin America, none has seemed as challenging to the outsider as the rain forest of the Amazon Basin, with its hunting-and-gathering Amerinds, which defied European occupation. Sarmiento once again put it succinctly:

If a flash of national literature can shine forth at any moment in these American societies, the fact is that it will come from . . . the struggle between European civilization and indigenous barbarism, between intellect and force: an overwhelming struggle in America, one which takes place in an environment so strange, so characteristic, and so foreign to the mentality in which the European spirit has been educated, because the dramatic events remain unknown outside of the location where they take place. . . .<sup>6</sup>

Sarmiento then created a theorem for the Latin American elite to understand the relationship between the Old World and the New. Herzog

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 35. .

takes this lore and transforms it into a metaphor using opera as the symbol of European civilization to be placed against the primitive song of the barbaric jungle and its inhabitants. Cinema becomes the means by which he captures this lore, and he uses his profound technical skills to project a filmic presentation of the Sarmentine sociopolitical myth.

Werner Herzog; whose filmography lists twelve feature productions, has evidenced a fascination with strange characters in spectacular locations. Born in 1942 in Germany, the country where he still lives and works, he was attracted to Latin America during the sixties, traveling in Mexico and in Central America. A story has even made the rounds that at this time Herzog attempted to found a self-governing territory in Guatemala;<sup>7</sup> thus a Herzog legend has developed of the adventurous, reckless filmmaker. And this fascination with the remote frontiers of Latin America persisted until the creation of *Fitzcarraldo*, as a documentary about the making of that film- emphasizes: in *Burden of Dreams* Herzog talks at length about the impact the Amazon Basin has had upon him, when he emphasizes the awesome and terrifying nature of the rain forest, and details the destruction of those who would defy the jungle.<sup>8</sup> His views then conform to a post-Sarmentine romanticism, revived in our own time, that Western societies challenge tropical environments at their peril, because civilization rarely overcomes barbarism and because barbarism is rarely that, but rather a primitive nobility.

Herzog's previous Latin American epic was *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* (1973). *Aguirre* anticipates the theme of *Fitzcarraldo* (although with a much more violent tone) and likewise tells of an actual historical figure in a fictionalized form: the story of the sixteenth-century Spanish conquistador, Lope de Aguirre, an individual of cunning cruelty. Herzog immediately seizes the viewer's attention with opening scenes of a Spanish expedition from the Peruvian highlands descending into the Amazon Basin. There Aguirre (played by the same Klaus Kinski who is to portray Fitzcarraldo) mutinously takes over control and murders the official in charge, as the group moves down the river in its search for the fabled wealth of El Dorado. But in the struggle with the jungle and the Indians, the Europeans are inevitably destroyed by their own ignorance and greed. These events are conveyed above all visually, by Herzog's technique which places the human events against the physical background in panoramas of intense beauty. Vincent Canby recognized the film's major theme in his review:

<sup>7</sup> "Werner Herzog" in *Roger Corman Presents Fitzcarraldo*, mimeographed press release for the mm. p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> Les Blank, *Burden of Dreams*, Flower Films, 1981. Blank records the making of *Fitzcarraldo* from 1979 to 1981: he has Herzog talk about himself and his films, and portrays Herzog, with obvious irony, as an obsessed and driven individual, precisely



Aguirre is truly mad, but as played by Klaus Kinski . . . he is the essential civilized man, a fellow who, in Mr. Herzog's vision of things, must be a lunatic . . . It's as if Mr. Herzog were saying that civilization—our assumption that we have conquered nature or even come to some accommodation with it—is as ridiculous as the Emperor's pleasure.<sup>9</sup>

While making *Aguirre* on location in Peru, Herzog became acquainted with the historical figure of Carlos Fermin Fitzcarrald. Fitzcarrald emerged as a well-known developer of the rubber resources of the Peruvian *montana* and like Aguirre, although some three hundred years later, passed into legend because of his struggle against the tropical rain forest and the hostile Indians, factors he tried to dominate with European rapaciousness and cruelty; Herzog, however, treats this character with humor and affection, even though he is as driven and monomaniacal as Lope de Aguirre. Fitzcarrald was born in 1862, the son of a North American sea captain named Fitzgerald who settled in Peru. His baptismal name of Isaias he later changed to Carlos Fernando.<sup>10</sup> Described as tall, fair, corpulent, bearded, he was a charismatic and spell-binding orator. An adventurer in his youth, he was badly wounded in a gambling fight, then married the beautiful daughter of a prominent Iquitos family and had four sons.

By the late 1880s in his mid-twenties, Fitzcarrald had made himself the preeminent merchant and rubber baron along the Ucayali and Urubamba rivers of Amazonian Peru, collecting such unofficial titles as "Feudal Lord of the Ucayali" and "King of Rubber." In 1893 he discovered the isthmus that was to bear his name: "It was the geographic discovery of greatest importance in Peru during the nineteenth century."<sup>11</sup> At this site he performed the incredible feat (so central to the film) of pulling a ship over the rugged terrain which rises to a height of 1,500 feet, so that he might enter another river system rich in rubber trees. He continued to lead expeditions while he acquired an evil reputation for vengeful wars against the fierce Indians of the Peruvian Amazon. At the age of only thirty-five in 1897 he died when his vessel overturned on the upper Urubamba and he tried to save one of his friends from drowning.

like the protagonist in *Fitzcarraldo*. See review of "Burden of Dreams" by Kevin Thomas. *Los Angeles Times*. IV. pp. 1 and 6.

<sup>9</sup>*New York Times*. April 4. 1977. I. p.,43.

<sup>10</sup>The literature on Fitzcarrald is extensive, including a short biography (Ernesto Reyna, *Fitzcarrald, el rey de caucho* [Lima: Taller Grafico de P. Barrentes C.I. 1941]). He is also discussed by Jorge Basadre in his standard *Historia de la Republica del Perú*, 5th ed., vol. 7 (Lima: Ediciones "Historia," 1963), pp. 3209-3211

<sup>11</sup>Basadre, p.3210.

Fitzcarrald remains a national hero in Peru, albeit a somewhat obscure one, because he insisted on Peruvian sovereignty over an area where Bolivian and Brazilian machinations threatened a takeover. This reputation made him one of those mythic figures so appealing to Herzog, a larger-than-life role on the stage of Latin American history that comes through clearly in what has been written about him: "the legend began to spread of a 'white Indian,' of a man who introduced civilization in the deepest jungle..." and "the genius of a man who like a meteoric benefactor appeared, civilized and disappeared."<sup>12</sup> And, "he delved deep into the promised land of Loreto [a Peruvian jungle province], searching in the immensity of the forest, among the most primitive of savages, searching for the happiness that civilized people had denied him."<sup>13</sup> In light of the character Herzog builds, other descriptions he must have absorbed are also significant:

Carlos F. Fitzcarrald had a sporting spirit, and was more explorer than rubber baron, the money he could spend being of no value to him .... Fitzcarrald, without rings or furnishings, dressed in white drill, a large Brazilian hat and boots, contrasted with the luxury and large amounts of jewelry of the rubber barons. . . . Fitzcarrald, in the name of civilization, declared war on [the Indians].<sup>14</sup>

This Fitzcarrald whom historians have thus described was incorporated into the superbly drawn protagonist Herzog fashioned. Above all, however, the filmmaker needed a motivation for Fitzcarraldo's actions. He has always been fascinated with obsessed types, possessed by a fixed idea. Aguirre's goal lay in the wealth of El Dorado and the rubber barons around Fitzcarraldo form a picture of rampant capitalist greed. Yet what obsession for Fitzcarraldo himself? The historical Fitzcarrald in fact had some opulent tastes cultivated on an extravagant estate in the midst of the rain forest of the Ucayali river basin: gardens, orchards, and greenhouses filled with plants from around the world, tended by a group of Chinese horticulturists who directed troops of Indian laborers, as well as storehouses filled with imported luxuries.<sup>15</sup> Because he had decided to fictionalize the historical narrative of the film,<sup>16</sup> Herzog needed a much more imaginative objective for his protagonist to pursue than flowers in the jungle. And he found it when

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., pp. 3209 and 3211.

<sup>13</sup> Reyna, p. 20.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., pp. 60-61 and 147.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., pp. 25-27, and Basadre, p. 3209.

<sup>16</sup> The idea of using the geographical- historical reality only as a framework for his imagination is dear from Herzog's original draft of the screenplay, which has been published: "Foreword" in Werner Herzog, *Fitzcarraldo: The Original Story*, translated by Martje Herzog and Alan Greenberg (San Francisco: Fjord Press, 1982), p. 7.

he saw that most lasting monument to the rubber barons' wealth in the Amazon: the opera house, known as the Teatro Amazonas, at Manaus in Brazil.

Opera lay at the very heart of European civilization: a combination of theater and music, it then added virtuoso singing and ballet sequences, enhanced by extensive scenery and costume design, all fused into one grandiose spectacle. Its immense popularity never diminished after its beginnings around 1600, but certainly the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries mark its apex as an art form. Opera composers, Rossini, Verdi, and Puccini in Italy, Gounod and Massenet in France, Wagner and Strauss in Germany, became the most revered icons of Western culture. And opera theaters became the new "cathedrals" of the Victorian era: magnificent structures graced the rebuilding of almost every European capital and each tried to outdo the other. In these opera houses the dominant bourgeoisie carried on their major social rituals of seeing and being seen. Finally, the invention of the phonograph diffused the voices of the great opera singers, notably Enrico Caruso, to the farthest corners of the world after the turn of the century. Thus opera assumed a very significant place in the cultural achievements of the West, and no one has expressed this idea more forcefully than Oscar Hammerstein I, an opera impresario in the United States:

Grand opera is, I truly believe, the most elevating influence upon modern society, after religion. From the earliest days it has ever been the most elegant of all forms of entertainment. . . . I sincerely believe that nothing will make better citizenship than familiarity with grand opera. It lifts one so out of the sordid affairs of life and makes material things seem so petty, so inconsequential, it places one for the time being, at least, in a higher and better world. . . . [Opera] will establish a brotherhood of art which knows not race or creed and makes all the civilized world akin; that will erect a shrine of beauty in form, color, and tone, before which all may bend the knee.<sup>17</sup>

Opera came to have a special place in Latin America soon after independence from Spain and Portugal. Traveling companies of singers from Europe found that they had large audiences in Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, Mexico, and Brazil. As the export wealth of these countries grew, their oligarchies and middle-class followers knew precisely what form of European culture would mean the most to them—the opera. And so great opera houses were built, the Teatro Colón in Buenos Aires, the Teatro Municipal in Rio de Janeiro, and the Teatro Amazonas in Manaus. No monument could be a greater indication of rubber riches than an opera house in the midst of the Brazilian jungle. Manaus, one thousand miles directly up the Amazon River, was the center for export

<sup>17</sup> Quoted from an interview in Vincent Sheean, *Oscar Hammerstein I: The Life and Exploits of an Impresario* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956), pp. 252-253.

to Europe of the latex collected from the *Hervea brasiliensis* tree. Its production crested around the turn of the century, then declined after the First World War when plantations became operative in Southeast Asia. But while it lasted, rubber made Manaus one of the wealthiest cities in the world, and no expense was spared or evidence of conspicuous consumption left out in the construction of this opera theater. On New Year's Eve of 1896 the Teatro Amazonas opened its doors to a view of the finest marble floors and columns, the richest carved woods, and the most lavish decoration. With its Grecian facade and art nouveau interior, this 1,200 seat auditorium has remained a stylistic curiosity, and a fitting setting for the opening of *Fitzcamudo*.<sup>18</sup>

The film begins with an arresting scene of operatic dimensions. It is night on the Amazon River and a launch is approaching Manaus; its motor is inoperative, forcing the occupants to paddle furiously. They are one Brian Sweeny Fitzgerald, called Fitzcarraldo, and his long-time companion, Molly, on their way to a music drama at the Teatro Amazonas. But not just any opera: it is a performance of Giuseppe Verdi's *Ernani* with a very special cast, consisting of Enrico Caruso as the bandit of the title and Sarah Bernhardt as his beloved, Elvira. Herzog thus sets up the terms of his metaphor from the outset. Verdi's vigorous early opera (1844) was based on Victor Hugo's historically significant drama, *Hernani* (1830), which was a peak in the triumph of French Romanticism. The version the rubber barons of Manaus see on stage, however, is a gross and decadent caricature, a travesty of a cultured civilization.<sup>19</sup> This Caruso (played by Costante Moret and sung by Veriano Luchetti) is a fat, pallid, diseased figure, while even more exaggerated is the supposed Sarah Bernhardt (played by a man, Jean Claude Dreyfuss, who made a career of impersonating her), the epitome of an aged crone, heavily made-up, and bewigged.<sup>20</sup> Of course, the "Divine Sarah" could not sing, so the archetype of an overweight soprano fulfills this duty in the orchestra pit. Such a ridiculous performance of mismatched artists plays before an audience of formally dressed Brazilian millionaires, aping the manners of the European elites, as the Indians outside look on with incomprehension; at the same time the sounds of the orchestra contrast with the noises of the forest. Fitzcarraldo and Molly arrive breathlessly for the final scene of the opera, force their way into

<sup>18</sup> For a description see Joel Honig, "Pearl of Brazil," *Opera News* 30:8 (December 25, 1965), 6-7

<sup>19</sup> Werner Schroeter, who staged the *Ernani* for Herzog, is known for his exaggerated melodramatic style used to comment on the nineteenth-century romantic world view. See George Dolis and Ingrid Weigand, "The Floating Opera," *Film Comment* 18:S (September-October, 1982), 57.

<sup>20</sup> Complete list of credits is found in *Roger Corman Presents Fitzcarraldo*.

the theater just as Caruso stabs himself and points into the audience, which Fitzcarraldo insists is directed at him, a signal of his mission to build an opera house even farther into the forest, at his home, Iquitos, Peru. Thus Herzog creates a clear transference when the romantic hero on the theatrical stage becomes the adventurous hero on the historical stage, that of the Amazon Basin, where another kind of opera is about to be acted out. Fitzcarraldo himself is the mirror image of those tenorial characters in operas who fill the pages of nineteenth-century music drama, torn between opposing forces that inevitably destroy them.

This opening tableau and the rest of the film indicate that Herzog has a highly developed sense of historicism, of the atmosphere and color of the past, as his *Every Man for Himself and God Against All: The Mystery of Kaspar Hauser* (1975) so brilliantly demonstrated. Indeed, Fitzcarraldo conveys the essence of the Amazon's turn-of-the-century rubber boom in a way that would find approval from most Latin American historians. But he has changed the historical record to suit his filmic purposes. Carlos Fermin Fitzcarrald, for example, died just after the Manaus opera house had opened. Caruso's career outside of Italy did not begin until after the opening of the twentieth century; in fact, Caruso never made the dangerous journey up the Amazon to Manaus, despite a persistent, if apocryphal, story to that effect, a tale which gained currency once more as a result of this film.<sup>21</sup> The historical verisimilitude supports Herzog's clearly presented polarities, the struggle between Fitzcarraldo and his obsession for constructing an opera house in the jungle, and the rain forest and its Indian inhabitants.

Having made opera the leitmotif of the opening scene, Herzog weaves this theme throughout the entire film, as a brief synopsis will make clear.<sup>22</sup> Particularly important is the ever-present contrast and connection between civilized, but foreign, opera and primitive, but autochthonous, Indians of the rain forest. As the curtain descends on the finale

<sup>21</sup> Kenneth Freed, "Amazon Opera House That Once Featured Caruso Used Now as a People's Theater," *Los Angeles Times*, May 13, 1983, I-A, p. 1, reports this story without evidence. Caruso's biographies never mention such a journey, although Caruso made a Rio de Janeiro debut in 1903, according to Howard Greenleaf, *Caruso* (New York: G. P. Putnam's, 1983), p. 79.

<sup>22</sup> This summary is based primarily on the published text, *Fitzcarraldo: The Original Story*, which is Herzog's initial outline for a screenplay, as well as on my own viewings of the film. Most of the scenes in the film came directly from this text, but of course material was deleted, added, and changed in the process of shooting and editing. For example, Verdi's *Un ballo in maschera* was the opera Herzog originally planned to use for the opening scene; it was transformed into Verdi's earlier work, *Ernani*, perhaps because Sarah Bernhardt was well-known for her acting in the Victor Hugo drama, *Hernani*. Characters also had to be changed in the final version; most notably the part of Wilbur, Fitzcarraldo's feeble-minded nephew, was eliminated after Mick Jagger withdrew in

of *Ernani* it has painted upon it a symbolic personification of the origin of the Amazon River, when "only the turn of the century and the rutting imagination of the jungle could have given birth to such a monstrous allegory,"<sup>23</sup> Herzog's view of a decadent Europe's image of nature, depicted in the most bloated operatic terms. The director of the Teatro Amazonas then explains to Fitzcarraldo how the enormous wealth from rubber, in a city where people send their laundry to Lisbon because the river water is dirty, has built this unique opera house; how the governor has proclaimed that, if Manaus grows, the inhabitants can simply tear down the theater and construct a bigger one; how Caruso has been paid 200,000 gold escudos for his one performance and Sarah Bernhardt twice as much, "though she can't even sing, but the public here wanted both of them at once."<sup>24</sup> Fitzcarraldo's reply is that "I have but one dream, the opera: the Grand Opera in the jungle. I am going to build it, and Caruso will inaugurate it."<sup>25</sup> And then on the return trip out of Manaus, he posits a synthesis, that while civilized operas and primitive jungles are distinct, they are also related in their insubstantiality, as spheres unconnected with reality: "Do you know what the Indians call the jungle? They call it the dreamland... We shall bring Grand Opera to this place."<sup>26</sup>

On his return to his home along the river in Iquitos, where Fitzcarraldo is determined to gain the wealth to build his opera house, the focus of the dichotomy becomes even more essentially musical, centering on his collection of records by Enrico Caruso.<sup>27</sup> The structure of the film itself now becomes "operatic," a series of set scenes, often punctuated at their climaxes by the recorded voice of Caruso. Herzog has indicated that he admires Caruso, "because of his simplicity, his absence of effort

the early stages of location shooting and Molly assumed some of that role. Thus most quotations are from the text and may not appear in precisely the same form in the film; furthermore, the problem of translation from the German spoken in the film to the English subtitles and from the German written in the screenplay to the English text may account for differences.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 21. Caruso and Bernhardt did appear together once, at a bond rally in the United States on April 6, 1917, according to Stanley Jackson, *Caruso* (New York: Stein and Day, 1972); his description might have influenced Herzog, for in the film, as on that day, "roughed and raddled with her red frizz straggling over kohl-rimmed eyes. Bernhardt hobbled about on her one good leg, but she was still a magnetic personality even in her seventies" (p. 236).

<sup>25</sup> Herzog, p. 19.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>27</sup> Caruso began his recording career in 1902: see "Caruso, Enrico." in Harold Rosenthal and John Warrack, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Opera*, 2d ed., (London: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 84.

within greatness," and that he carefully chose the selections from *Rigoletto*, *Manon*, *Boheme*, and *Pagliacci*; that he has used the actual recordings from the early years of this century, not as a mere musical accompaniment, but as an

integral part of the story. One always sees the hero putting the disc on the gramophone. It is an element of the action, never just a voice over. The images from the jungle gain thereby another dimension: we feel the theatricality of the place, we see the image of the opera that surges from the sweat of the jungle.<sup>28</sup>

The way Herzog uses Caruso's voice is to sharpen the contrast between civilization's arias and barbarism's silences. Although a series of primitive drums and voices, provided by the Latin American folk music group of Popol Yuh, sometimes acts in opposition to the operatic selections, in general Caruso's singing represents European culture's dominant voice, with other sound acting as background, always there, like the jungle and its people, muted and dominated. When Fitzcarraldo awakens after his journey to Manaus, he is surrounded by Indian children, dogs (one of which is named Verdi), a parrot, and a pig. He turns to his most precious possession, a phonograph with a large horn, puts on a record and the voice of the great tenor comes forth, "terribly scratchy, but of an unspeakably dignified beauty, sad and strong and moving."<sup>29</sup> It is Caruso's greatest role as the clown in *Pagliacci*, his immediately identifiable signature of *Vesti la giubba*. The children stare and listen in awe and wonder without a sound; Fitzcarraldo tells the pig that he will have a box in the new opera house, perhaps indicating a comic relationship between opera and beast in Latin America, where musical pearls indeed may be cast before the swine which appreciates them more than the new rich of Manaus. This same crass society of wealthy rubber barons also controls Iquitos, but as yet they have no understanding, as Fitzcarraldo does, that rubber sold to Europe must be used to buy European culture. At first Fitzcarraldo attempts to confront them by climbing the Church tower and threatening not to leave until Iquitos has an opera house; his effort only lands him in jail, from which he is released because the police officer sympathizes with the Indian children who pray for him so that they can get their morning concert. Then he tries to charm the powerful by taking his beloved Caruso recordings to a garden party, where he and Molly hope to persuade the richest men (who arrive finely dressed but carrying rifles) to finance the theater. Fitzcarraldo insists that opera "gives expression to our greatest feelings," but they scarcely

<sup>28</sup> Herzog interviewed by Jean-Claude Bonnet and Michael Celemenski, *Cinematographe*, May, 1982. p. 9.

<sup>29</sup> Herzog, p. 26.

listen to Caruso's voice, and he leaves, shouting that "the reality of your world is nothing more than a caricature of great opera," while they only label him the "conquistador of the useless."<sup>30</sup>

If the initial part of the film has the qualities of early nineteenth century *opera buffa*, a comic sense of misunderstanding, Fitzcarraldo's odyssey in search of rubber riches to build his opera house has Wagnerian proportions, like Siegfried's Rhine journey in *Götterdämmerung* (although Caruso rarely sang Wagner). An inaccessible zone rich in unexploited rubber trees could be reached, Fitzcarraldo determines, if he can achieve the miraculous feat of hauling a large boat out of one river, over a hill, into the next river: in short, a superhuman effort in the jungle in order to achieve his dream of an opera house in Iquitos.<sup>31</sup> He persuades Molly, who had abandoned her career as an opera singer to run a bordello, that she must give him her savings for the purchase of a vessel, appropriately rechristened the *Molly Aida* (because the heroine of Verdi's opera sacrificed everything for her lover), and thus he sets out with a colorful crew of river sailors toward the Amazon tributaries. They stop at a missionary station on the edge of the savage Jivaro Indian domain, "some huts in a square, one of them faintly reminiscent of something like Western civilization." When an older cleric, speaking of the Indians, says "we can't seem to cure them of their basic notion that our normal life is just an illusion, behind which lies the reality of dreams," Fitzcarraldo replies that "this interests me very much. You see, I am a man of the opera":<sup>32</sup> a connection is made then between the European's world view and the Native American's, the point where Fitzcarraldo's dreams and the Indians' dreams meet.

The Sarmentine theme sharpens as the *Molly Aida* moves into the interior for the struggle between Europeans and natives, in this case the Jivaro, known for the shrinking of human heads. This division between civilization and barbarism takes the form of a rather trite device, the journey upriver into a "Heart of Darkness," but the operatic artifice lends the theme much originality and strength. The Indians begin following the boat, keeping themselves invisible, but making their presence known with the sound of drums. While the crew is ready to open fire indiscriminately, Fitzcarraldo pronounces that "now it is Caruso's

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 43-44.

<sup>31</sup> In a note relating to this part of his film, Herzog indicates how he has changed the factual historical geography: "The two tributaries of the Amazon, the Pachitea and the Ucayali, do exist, but in reality their course is completely different from the description in this story" (ibid., p. 3). Furthermore, this transport of a ship overland parallels the feat of the historical Fitzcarrald at the isthmus named after him, although he did it more realistically, by disassembling and then reassembling the vessel.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 88..



turn," as he places the phonograph with its projecting speaker on the bridge, a protagonist in the story and also a symbol of high art, sending out its message: "and then, suddenly . . . the voice of Caruso, sad and beautiful, and stately and very scratchy. The music mixes with the drums [of the Indians], swells up against them, and gradually silences them. The jungle seems to be paralyzed with emotion by Caruso's beautiful, sad voice." Again and again, Fitzcarraldo uses his recordings of the tenor as civilization's weapon against the Indians:

These Jivaros, says Fitzcarraldo, were driven by religious faith, to seek a land without sorrow and death, and, at the end of their pilgrimage, a White God, Viracocha, would lead them there. We have taken advantage of this. But this God doesn't come with cannons, he comes with the voice of Caruso.<sup>33</sup>

Fitzcarraldo's dependence on Caruso grows more acute after his crew deserts him, fearing a Jivaro attack. When he plays the start of the *Quartet* from *Rigoletta*, the Indians appear in a large number of canoes behind the *Molly Aida*, preventing the vessel from turning back. Like the children of Iquitos, the Jivaros have seemingly accepted the man who plays Caruso as their Viracocha and refuse to let him leave. Fitzcarraldo decides that he can use the Indians' help to complete his project, when at last he reaches the hill which separates the two rivers, the Pachitea and the Ucayali, at the point where they are only narrowly separated. A long section of the film details the effort made to haul the ship up the steep slope: the Indians cut a pathway through the dense jungle of enormous trees; block, tackle, and winches are set up; and human and steam power complete the perilous and exciting ascent.<sup>34</sup> This dramatic climax is punctuated by the words of Fitzcarraldo: "'We forgot something, Enrico, Enrico Caruso.' And then a beautiful stately aria begins and enraptures us."<sup>35</sup> (Actually in the film it is a duet, *O Mimi, tu piu non torni* from Act IV of *La Boheme*.) And as the ship descends into the Ucayali, the sound track develops the psychological insight and tension that only music can create: the Indian chant gives way to the opening again of the *Quartet* from *Rigoletta*, now a leitmotif for Caruso's, and consequently Fitzcarraldo's interaction with the Jivaros, but suddenly broken off, waiting to be completed, as it will be, by disaster.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., pp. 96-99.

<sup>34</sup> This scene in *Fitzcarraldo* created the most notoriety in the international press and gave Herzog a reputation for neurotic obsession with creating realism. He insisted that the filming be done on site using a full-sized vessel hauled by local Indians. Rumors persisted that Indians were killed, injured or virtually enslaved, but Herzog denied these stories and defended his attachment to the jungle and its people, especially in Blank's documentary, *Burden of Dreams*..

<sup>35</sup> Herzog, p. 129.

Fitzcarraldo can only be elated, as he sees the way open to the rubber rich territory he has entered, for within his grasp lies the promised wealth to construct his opera house. The jungle, the Indians, the forces of barbarism are to decree otherwise. With his ship safely on the Ucayali, the entire crew gets drunk; suddenly the next morning they are awakened to find the *Molly Aida* drifting down the river toward the Pongo das Mortes, the rapids and falls that had made the journey upriver impossible. Herzog, with his well-developed sense of irony, completes his use of Caruso: as the ship slams into a cliff bordering the river it jars the phonograph on again and the *Quartet* from *Rigoletto* is concluded as the *Molly Aida* plunges through the Pongo das Mortes.

An uplifting, once more buffa, finale concludes *Fitzcarraldo*. One of the Iquitos rubber barons agrees to buy back the ship for his expanding business, while Fitzcarraldo remains in despair. In an effort to divert his attention the entrepreneur urges Fitzcarraldo to return to Manaus where a visiting opera company is putting on a work by a "modern" composer: "'Federico ... Ricardo,' Don Aquilino says; 'Wagner ... who wrote Parsifal,' Fitzcarraldo replies, once again filled with enthusiasm about his dream."<sup>36</sup> At this point the film makes a rather inexplicable departure from the original screenplay. Herzog had intended to end with a performance of *Die Walküre*, the second opera in Wagner's *Ring des Nibelungen* cycle; perhaps he understood that in Latin America at the turn of the century Wagner had come to represent the most advanced European cultural modernism. However, he changed his mind, stating that "the music of *Walküre* corrodes in the forest .... Wagner and the jungle would be like a dog and cat";<sup>37</sup> another, more practical reason might have been the expense and complexity, to say nothing of the proper voices, involved in staging a Wagnerian music drama while on location, a feat more formidable than hauling a ship over a mountain. Some dialogue is added identifying Wagner's work as *I Puritani*: "No, that's an Italian opera by Bellini," an opera-wise Fitzcarraldo announces. So he takes the money from the sale of the *Molly Aida* and sends to Manaus for formal evening dress, an enormous cigar, a velvet-covered chair from a box at the Teatro Amazonas, and the entire visiting opera company.

The final tableau is an opera gala, like the opening scene at the Teatro Amazonas, but with a notable reversal in the participants. The opera now comes to Fitzcarraldo; he does not have to exhaust himself on a river voyage to Manaus. Rather than a stage inside the auditorium with a decadent Caruso and Bernhardt, we see Indian and mestizo

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., pp. 153-154.

<sup>37</sup> Bonnet and Celemenski, p. 9.

vocalists from Latin America perform out of doors. The audience is not a crowd of grasping parvenus come to the opera to be seen; *tout* Iquitos looks on in amazement and joy, all classes and all cultural and ethnic groups. And the opera itself is not *Ernani* with its suicidal climax; it is *I Puritan*; with its happy ending of lovers reunited. Fitzcarraldo is seated on the bridge of the *Molly Aida*, which serves as a royal box, with his pig at last seeing the promised performance, as the strangely costumed singers pour forth the Act I duet, beginning with the tenor's *Ate, 0 cara, amor talora*. Here is "Fitzcarraldo's now multifaceted status as spectator, entrepreneur and celebrity applauded by the audience. . . . The jubilant air of climactic wish fulfillment."<sup>38</sup> The comedy is ended.

From the time it was released in Europe in 1982, *Fitzcarraldo* has enjoyed long runs in major cities throughout the world and has been constantly revived. The critical commentary has been continuous and can best be described as "mixed." Although Herzog received the citation for best director at the Cannes Film Festival, some reviewers found the film pretentious. The majority, however, praised it as imaginative and humorous, a far cry from Herzog's usual heavy fare. A number of longer essays in film journals in the United States and Europe attempted to discover deeper meanings in *Fitzcarraldo*. Four related viewpoints can be singled out as particularly significant. First, in an ad hominem argument certain critics denounced Herzog's "imperialism." Vincent Canby termed the film "an adventure comedy about ... 19th century capitalism running amok."<sup>39</sup> Pauline Kael thoroughly disliked Herzog's insistence on "realism," the remote locations and boat-hauling operations, at the expense of the Indiansr "playing Pharoah," she called it.<sup>40</sup> The New Leader raged against the director as a "lunatic" who represents "one aspect of the German geist, the 19th century visionary imperialist."<sup>41</sup> Second, other writers, while adhering more closely to an analysis of *Fitzcarraldo*'s content, stressed the surreal atmosphere engendered by a pairing of extreme opposites in his images throughout the film, with the result that "Herzog's genius lies as ever in using wild incongruity as a way into Pantheism."<sup>42</sup> A third group, following this lead, but in a more specific manner, pointed to the opposing forces found in the clash of cultures, between the "imperialists" and the "primitives." Kevin Thomas concluded that Herzog's principal focus lay not on Fitzcarraldo's efforts to enrich himself, but on a desire to show a "highly

<sup>38</sup> Steve Jenkins, *Monthly Film Bulletin* 49:582 (July 1982), 127.

<sup>39</sup> Vincent Canby, *New York Times*, October 10, 1982, I, p. 89.

<sup>40</sup> Pauline Kael, *New Yorker* 58:35 (October 18, 1982), 173-178.

<sup>41</sup> Robert Asahina, *The New Leader* 65:18 (October 4, 1982), 20.

<sup>42</sup> Harian Kennedy, "Assignment in Berlin," *Film Comment* 18:3 (May-June 1982), 23.

amusing and profoundly ironic cultural confrontation with the Jivaro Indians of the region."<sup>43</sup> Janet Maslin went one step further to insist upon the "confrontation between ... two different dreams."<sup>44</sup> A fourth set of reviewers attempted to discern a more abstract meaning in *Fitzcarraldo*. "Herzog has always set metaphor above plot, and here the quasi-absurdity of the plot heightens the power of the metaphor."<sup>45</sup> What is the metaphor? A favorite of the critics was the superhuman effort made to haul the *Molly Aida* up and down the mountain from one river to the next.<sup>46</sup> Certainly this scene in the film, coming as it does near the end, brings together several strands of the plot developed up to this point, namely the impossible goal which necessitates a heroic quest in an unknown land filled with dangerous people. The triumph lies not in the achievement, but the effort, toward a great end: in this case not the wealth of a capitalist enterprise, but the production of beautiful art.

Therefore, that art, opera, must be seen as an equally, if not more, significant metaphor. Why use grand opera? To some critics the question remained obscure: "How a love of grand opera fits into all this is a bit unclear."<sup>47</sup> The answer lies in the film-lore created by Werner Herzog, and for an understanding of his intentions, both conscious and unconscious, it is essential to look at his own words. With the several languages he commands, he has been ready to discuss his work in print and television interviews in many different countries. Fitzcarraldo's "story" or "life" was of little interest to him and, therefore, the biographical aspect is only a device by which to portray his ideas.<sup>48</sup> While Herzog denies that any of those ideas has to do with opera, which he disdains, claiming that he only attended once and then walked out in mid-performance,<sup>49</sup> nevertheless he demonstrates a sophisticated use of opera, in both time and place. Thus he can equate opera with civilization because he understands its importance in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europe and in those regions under Europe's cultural hegemony. *Fitzcarraldo* indeed makes opera itself an important metaphor for European imperialism, as he uses the characteristics of this unique art form throughout his film.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Kevin Thomas. *Los Angeles Times*. October 28, 1982, VI, p. 6.

<sup>44</sup> Janet Maslin, *New York Times*. October 12, 1982, 111, p. 9.

<sup>45</sup> Nick Roddick, *Films and Filming* 334 (July 1982), 23.

<sup>46</sup> See for example Dolis and Weigand, p. 59, and Michael Goodwin, "Herzog: The God of Wrath," *American Film* 7:8 (June 1982), 45.

<sup>47</sup> Asahina, p. 20.

<sup>48</sup> Maslin, p. 9.

<sup>49</sup> Kael, p. 176.

<sup>50</sup> Kennedy, p. 23.

The very texture of *Fitzcarraldo* reflects opera at the turn of the century, its overripe Romanticism and exoticism. Herzog declared that "I had an instinctive feeling that the journey had an operatic quality."<sup>51</sup> And continuing in the same spirit, he noted that "what occurs in the film is like what occurs in an opera . . . the jungle is full of the strong emotions, it is an instrument of the imagination and of dreams, that is it possesses the same qualities as grand opera. Between the jungle and the opera exists an evident marriage."<sup>52</sup> In other words, a marriage between civilization and barbarism, one of unresolved, continuous tension. Yet a resolution does come at the end of *Fitzcarraldo*. The glorious dream of an opera house in the jungle, a symbol of untarnished Western civilization fails, but a more modest bridge is built between the European and the indigenous in terms of the hybrid *Puritani*, a mestizo presentation of grand opera. While some reviewers have seen the conclusion as a victory of the jungle and the Indians over opera and its followers,<sup>53</sup> this interpretation only indicates a lack of understanding of the Sarmentine dichotomy between civilization and barbarism which forms the core of *Fitzcarraldo*: Herzog fully comprehends that Europeanization and modernization have dominated Latin America for the past century. Yet in the process Latin America has evolved its own culture, a blend of traditions, often in absurd juxtaposition. Opera in Latin America and an opera house in the jungle is one of those absurdities.

*Fitzcarraldo*, then, weaves together several aspects of lore and the methodology of elitelore provides the key for understanding Herzog's creation. In most previous studies of elitelore, one particular dimension of this non-institutionalized knowledge has been emphasized, but *Fitzcarraldo* illustrates that important artistic works furnish the material for various levels of analysis. Cinema-lore's principles illuminate how Herzog consciously and visually projects his own and his time's lore by the most effective technical means and, as a result, produces an important historical document about Latin America's past. Equally significant is the way in which the filmmaker incorporates other lore about the region: from literature, the division between European and indigenous cultures, and from music, the place of opera in the late nineteenth century. And these ideas Herzog uses with evident irony for his own ends. This skill is what makes Werner Herzog the powerful artist he is and an important contributor to Latin American lore.

<sup>51</sup> Maslin, p. 9.

<sup>52</sup> Quoted in *La Prensa* (Buenos Aires), February 13, 1983, III, p. 5.

<sup>53</sup> See for example Stanley Kaufmann, *The New Republic* 187: 16 (October 18, 1982), 25.