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Book Review: Werner Herzog, *Conquest of the Useless: Reflections from the Making of Fitzcarraldo*

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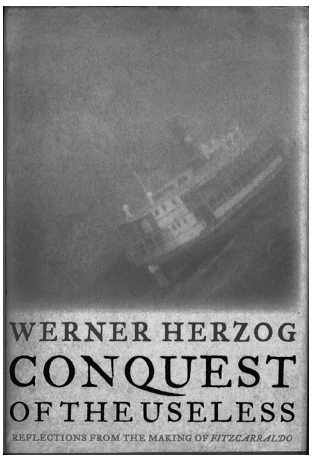

Conquest of the Useless is a detailed, yet decidedly idiosyncratic account of the events surrounding the production of Werner Herzog's iconic 1982 film *Fitzcarraldo*. Unlikely to surprise anyone familiar with Herzog's work, the book is far from a traditional production history, containing instead the director's private journals and musings from 1979-1981 during the epically lengthy and trouble-ridden production. Herzog's preface to the book informs the reader that "these texts are not reports on the actual filming—of which little is said. Nor are they journals, except in a very general sense. They might be described instead as inner landscapes, born of the delirium of the jungle. But even that may not be entirely accurate—I am not sure."[1] Despite this characteristically oblique declaration, the book is not merely the stream-of-consciousness mediation of an artist in an abyss. Existing somewhere between autobiography, textual supplement, and myth (or counter-myth), *Conquest of the Useless* is a mosaic of anecdotes, dreams, and observations that alternately complement, inform, and complicate existing knowledge of and rumor about Herzog and the production of *Fitzcarraldo*. It provides insight into one of Herzog's best-known films as well as his filmmaking practice.

Conquest of the Useless contains chronicles of many specific production challenges, including the replacement of the original cast—Jason Robards, who left due to health issues, and Mick Jagger, whose touring schedule did not permit him to wait while a replacement was found—after shooting was already well under way. Extraordinary organizational and physical challenges also plagued the production, which included hundreds of local extras, a notoriously difficult lead actor in Klaus Kinski (who replaced Robards), and the movement of a 320-ton steamship over a mountain in the Amazon rainforest. Accounts of these events are hardly new, however. Most of them have already been reported elsewhere, including in Les Blank's 1982 documentary *Burden of Dreams*, for which Blank spent months alongside Herzog's crew in Peru. *Burden of Dreams* has become central to the small subgenre of making-of documentaries about impassioned film directors working on impossible projects, joined most notably in 1991 by *Hearts of Darkness: A Filmmaker's Apocalypse*, about Francis Ford Coppola and the production of *Apocalypse Now* (1979). *Conquest of the Useless* forms an effective companion to *Burden of Dreams*, providing Herzog's inner monologue pertaining to the same famous events as well as his reactions to the media's

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fascination with the film project, which resulted in the publication of one unfounded story after the next. Also featured are his private thoughts on the conditions of the jungle and the process of moving that infamous ship over a mountain, a seemingly impossible task that loomed over the entire production.

Herzog's recounting of the widely known misfortune of his film is quite compelling, both for general audiences as well as those studying his work, but the core of the book ultimately deals less with the recording of major events than with Herzog's very personal material relationships and reflections while shooting. Alongside the accounts of conversations with actors and struggles with machinery, the volume is suffused with intensely intimate observations about the turbulent physical world that Herzog both battled and attempted to harness for the purposes of his film. The frustrations, whims, tempers, and fancies of the human actors and crew are mirrored in the dramatic shifts in temperament of the rivers Pongo, Nanay, Urubamba, and Camisea. Herzog's observations of the rivers and the jungle sometimes near an obsessive pitch, and like the native hunters and boatmen working on his crew, he searches for insight in every ripple of water and rumble of thunder, venturing to hunt not animals but images.

These intimate moments in which Herzog admires and reacts to his environment lend insight into his larger project, as his observations about the textures of plants, the patterns of water, and the oppressive scent of the jungle's decay reveal in tiny increments his intense desire for physical mastery of the shifting, inhospitable space. The resultant images of the ship moving over the mountain are marked by the material frictions of mud and metal, rope and water, and muscle and wood, underscoring Herzog's conviction, repeatedly confirmed across his body of work, that filmmaking is, above all, a physical and corporeal process.

As the book's title suggests, the notion of conquest hangs over these events. In the course of the two-and-a-half-year saga, entries proclaiming optimistic ideals of conquest over dismissive executives and extremely difficult conditions slowly give way to anxieties about the possibility of instead becoming the conquered, as the production's struggles with natural and human forces grow in scope and appear increasingly futile. At times, Herzog's journals appear to echo the real and imagined conquistadors that so clearly fascinate him; the jungle seems to represent both the potential of unimaginable fortune, be they riches of gold or images, at the same time that its "obscenity" threatens to destroy human, animal, and machine. Underneath this dialogue of conquest and domination lie the legacies of imperialist cultural assumptions about the savage and the civilized. While the text of the film and Herzog's wider preoccupations as a filmmaker frequently seek to challenge and complicate these ideas, he is nonetheless taken by surprise at certain moments—as when the camp's native cook demonstrates healing abilities to rival those of the production's Sorbonne-educated physician. Despite Herzog's previous experience making challenging films in inhospitable and unpredictable locales, he still reveals a sense of awe and despair when the "chaos" of the jungle continually refuses to yield to the order and structure that the production attempts to impose. Thus the book's title refers not only to the "useless" conquest of a mountain by a madman and his steamship but also to the futility of attempts to impose Western ideas of order on a system to which they are incompatible and impotent.

Herzog's text ultimately becomes a very private, fragmented, and dream-laden treatise on the personal drive toward failure. A sense of extreme self-doubt countered by ever more rabid conviction is infused into the prose. Herzog writes:

> A stifling feeling of pressing forward with something that ultimately could not be done [sic]. If all of this were in another country, I would have fewer reservations. The greatest uncertainties: the actors, the new camp, the ship over the mountain, the scope of the undertaking, which no one has grasped yet, the Indians, the financing—the list can be added to indefinitely. Seen from the plane, the sheer expanse of the jungle is terrifying; no one who has not been there can picture it.[2]

At another point later in the production, Herzog laments his inability to transfer his conviction

to his crew. He writes, "It became clear to me that no one is on my side anymore, not a single person, none, no one, not a single one. In the midst of hundreds of Indian extras, dozens of forest workers, boatmen, kitchen personnel, the technical team, and the actors, solitude flailed at me like a huge enraged animal."[3] These quotes reveal both an attempt to combat and control a potentially infectious and destructive sense of doubt as well as what is perhaps the film's greatest legacy—Herzog's positioning, likely as much by his own hand as by those of other sources, as a singular man driven solely by the force of his vision.

Finally, as a drought forced the production to abandon shooting for nearly six months, leaving the film's massive twin steamships beached in the shallow waters of two Amazon tributaries, Herzog began to wonder what exactly he was attempting to master. In writing "for a moment the feeling crept over me that my work, my vision, is going to destroy me,"[4] Herzog is likely the last person to recognize what most people involved with the project, be they skeptical financiers in Germany or boatmen in the Amazon, had realized long before. In reading the text, there is the sense that this potential for destruction under circumstances in which failure is a great likelihood forms a significant source of his drive and conviction. The impossibility of the physical task of *Fitzcarraldo* becomes as important as the film itself.

Though few things may be said about Werner Herzog with great certainty, he is undeniably a master of self-construction. His persona and films are informed and colored by countless stories—the true, the exaggerated, and the invented—mixing together to form a highly performative identity. It is in this vein that *Conquest of the Useless* should be read, recognizing that it is as much a work of art as it is an (in)accurate record of events that took place in Peru between 1979 and 1981. In reality, it probably falls somewhere in between, thus offering the potential to be approached from a variety of perspectives, including those rooted in facts and history as well as those more concerned with objects of creative expression. Ultimately, for readers interested in gaining greater context for *Fitzcarraldo* and for those interested in Herzog's project of self-fashioning, *Conquest of the Useless* will provide a particularly compelling piece of a vast and enigmatic puzzle.

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End Notes

1 Werner Herzog, *Conquest of the Useless: Reflections from the Making of* Fitzcarraldo (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), ix.
2 Ibid., 96.
3 Ibid., 237.
4 Ibid., 58.