

out the student body. "We have to remember that most people are incredibly ignorant of what's going on," one student declared. Another, the winner of a school award for general excellence, said in a seminar on education, "I have trouble with parental involvement. Most parents don't know the first thing about education—processes, philosophies, approaches. Why should they be consulted?" A professor warned, "If you don't read the *Times's* editorials on election day, you're going into the voting booth blind." And one student

recorded the following after an interview with a colleague: "He told me, 'I am an egotist. Becoming popular is my main goal.' Criticizing his government for the way he says it robs the country, he wants to help get rid of the corruption he saw everywhere when growing up. But he doesn't see any reason why such idealism should stand in the way of personal success. Exposing crooked bureaucrats is fine, but he seems clear about what comes first for him. 'My personal desires are above humanity,' he says with assurance."

As the end of the year approached, personal concerns became paramount. A Wellesley graduate announced that "I want it all—100% personal life and 100% career" which includes "becoming a network anchor within eight years." Much grumbling, however, was exchanged about the inadequacies of Columbia's reputedly outstanding "connection network."

Several organizations gave informational and recruiting presentations. Among these, the Voice of America announced plans to interview students for a one-year intern-

ship in Washington. The student lounge filled with scoffs and energetic agreement on the evils of propaganda. "The only people who work there," cautioned one professor, "are those who can't make it in any other part of the business." He saw no need to moderate his view just because he had never heard a VOA broadcast: "It's common knowledge," he said.

Later, word went out that the internship involved a \$16,000 salary. The 15 available interview spots filled up—quickly, silently. □



THE TALKIES

THE MEISTERSLINGER

by Martha Bayles

Burden of Dreams is a documentary made by Les Blank, an American filmmaker, about the German director Werner Herzog's efforts to complete his latest film, *Fitzcarraldo*. It could not have been made without Herzog's cooperation, allowing Blank to follow him into the Peruvian

Martha Bayles is film critic for *The American Spectator*.

jungle, where *Fitzcarraldo's* main sequences were shot. Herzog also spent time in front of Blank's camera, holding forth about himself and his art. And *Burden of Dreams* was released before *Fitzcarraldo*—timing which must have had Herzog's approval. Probably he expected the documentary revealing his struggles as a bold, unconventional artist to spark interest in *Fitzcarraldo*.

Things haven't worked out quite that way. The audience response to *Burden of Dreams* has been, for the most part, guffaws. And Herzog has begun telling reporters that he wishes people would forget Blank's film when they see *Fitzcarraldo*. "It's easy," he griped in a recent interview, "to show a film director as a foolish man."

Does this mean Blank took unfair advantage, filming the great director from behind while he flaps his arms at six hundred Aguaruna Indians? Not really. Herzog is a handsome fellow, photogenic even when knee-deep in jungle muck. And the majority of the audience are dazzled by his much-publicized "dreams," which include making his films as authentic as possible. *Fitzcarraldo*, the tale of a nineteenth-century Irishman who hauls a steamboat over a mountain in order to gain access to the rubber trade so that he may bring grand opera to Peru, is the sort of jungle-adventure film they used to shoot in studios among potted palms, recorded macaw cries, and nonwhite extras from the unemployment office. Herzog rightly declares such meth-

ods to be "claustrophobic," and leads his actors and technicians into a remote section of the Amazon where they will feel, along with fear and discomfort, a *frisson* of primeval awe which presumably they will translate into art.

Herzog fans will also remember *Aguirre, the Wrath of God*—probably his most successful film in the United States. Based on the true story of Lope de Aguirre, a Spanish conquistador who went on a rampage of murder and mayhem until he was captured and shot in 1561, *Aguirre* is so authentic the Andean mist practically rolls off the screen. And American audiences interpret it in political terms as a protest against imperialism, or perhaps the rise of Hitler.

Yet even at *Aguirre*, which is a better film than *Fitzcarraldo* or *Burden of Dreams*, one hears some impertinent mirth. Some critics have pointed out that the real theme of *Aguirre* is not protest but cosmic absurdity: the human will cut free from the illusions of morality, asserting itself against the chaos of the universe. The laughter, they suggest, is philosophical.

I think these critics are right about Herzog's theme, but not about the laughter. In the first place, there are so many artists dealing with cosmic absurdity nowadays, the average audience can hardly be expected to do much more than yawn. In the second place, there is the problem of

Klaus Kinski, the German actor who plays both Aguirre and Fitzcarraldo. He plays every role, including himself in *Burden of Dreams*, as though he were Buster Keaton on a jag. He is not without deliberate humor, but his fate with American audiences seems to be inadvertent comedy—his most serious efforts come off as the funniest: scarecrow antics and mad-scientist mugging.

I must concede that Herzog's original casting of Jason Robards as Fitzcarraldo, with Mick Jagger as his simple-minded sidekick, might have led to the kind of film people laugh *with* instead of *at*. But halfway through the first shooting, Robards contracted amoebic dysentery; and when Jagger also left, the sidekick part was written out of the script. Actually, it may have been Herzog's passion for authenticity that made Robards sick. In one scene Fitzcarraldo is supposed to enter into a work agreement with an Indian tribe by drinking their ceremonial liquor, made by the women chewing a starchy root and spitting it out into a trough. In *Burden of Dreams* we see Kinski stubbornly refusing to touch this concoction—and although the audience hooted at that, too, I couldn't help feeling that for once the poor man had a reason to mug.

So perhaps authenticity drove out verisimilitude, leaving us with a German Irishman ranting in German to German-speaking Peruvians. But the language has a certain rightness, because the whole enterprise of Herzog's filmmaking has a distinctly

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Wagnerian flavor. And it's odd that neither Herzog nor his admirers ever mention Wagner, considering the extent of the debt.

Let me put it this way. If Wagner had been a film director, he too would have ignored the real, historical Fitzcarraldo—a practical rubber baron who dismantled his steamboat before hauling it, and hadn't a thought in his head of bringing opera to Peru. Wagner too would have insisted on using a steamboat ten times the actual size, and demanded from his workers and performers the ultimate labor and fortitude—even death—because the cause of art requires moving ships over mountains. And since Wagner's greatest accomplishments were not dramatic moments but massive concoctions of scenery and music, he would have overlooked the utter flatness of the characters in *Fitzcarraldo*, and considered the film justified by the extraordinary sequence showing a passenger steamboat the size of the Staten Island Ferry looming, slith-

ering, and bumping its way down the Ucayali Rapids of Death, while Enrico Caruso's voice soars out through the horn of a windup Victrola.

But there is more to Wagner than stupendous effects. There is also a philosophy—a grandiose conception of art as the only redeeming feature of an otherwise meaningless universe. These views are shared by Herzog, and to some degree by American audiences who look to film directors for spiritual guidance. But in *Burden of Dreams* Herzog blows it by revealing certain aspects of this philosophy which his American admirers would most vehemently reject.

A mechanistic view of nature, for example. Fitzcarraldo's dream of bringing opera to the jungle seems arbitrary to Americans: wild and crazy, like something Steve Martin would cook up. But for Herzog it is not arbitrary at all. He considers grand opera to be the pinnacle of creation, while the raw, teeming life of the jungle is the pits. "It's not beautiful," he says, glaring at the

Sierra Club types in the front row. "It's hateful. Nothing but vileness and fornication. The trees here are in misery, the birds are in misery. They don't sing, they just screech in pain. Even the stars up here are a mess."

This sounds so outrageous that even the most humorless environmentalists snort with laughter. They can't believe Herzog is serious. But he is. His assumptions not only about nature but about the jungle's human inhabitants seem calculated to rub the average educated American the wrong way. In *Burden of Dreams* he extols the Indians as "people like lions," and deplores the "contamination" of their culture. But actions speak louder than words when he thinks nothing of transporting several hundred tribesmen miles away from their home villages and supplying them with prostitutes while they risk their lives in primitive hauling equipment in order to make a striking image for the folks at the Paris Theatre.

Also in *Burden of Dreams* we are told that Herzog got the Indians to

work for him by promising to win them legal title to their land. Since there has been no subsequent mention of this, I assume it didn't work out—if indeed it was ever attempted. I must say that I doubt it was. If Herzog shares his American audience's twentieth-century cultural relativism, it is only up to a point. After that, he begins to look a lot more like his own nineteenth-century character: willing to sacrifice mere savages for the sake of a higher culture's high culture.

One need not be a radical anthropologist to appreciate the man's arrogance—which extends not only to Indians but to his audience as well. "My dreams are the same as yours," he intones. "The only distinction between you and me is that I can articulate them." The steamboat on the rapids is really the only thrill in *Fitzcarraldo*, and if that is an example of Herzog's ability to articulate other people's dreams, then somebody should tell him that his expensive, arduous, dangerous means do not justify the end. □



EMINENTOES

MUSSOLINISMO

by Arnold Beichman

Some years ago I traveled on a junket to Italy to do a story on the Piaggio plant in Pontedera between Pisa and Florence. Piaggio had popularized the motor-scooter, a low-powered, two-wheeled vehicle which could carry two adults. I had driven one of their scooters around New York for several years as a way of beating urban problems like traffic, finding a taxi during rush-hour, and parking. (In tribute to its snarling motor, the machine was named "Vespa," which means wasp in Italian).

At the Piaggio plant, a dignified, elderly aeronautical engineer was introduced to me as the man who had "invented" the Vespa. What had inspired the aeronautical engineer? Well, after World War II, there was a desperate shortage of transportation in Italy. So Il Signore the Engineer

Arnold Beichman is a political scientist who is currently Visiting Scholar at the Hoover Institution.

looked about the Piaggio plant and saw thousands upon thousands of airplane nose-wheels stacked up against the factory walls. What nose-wheels? The engineer smiled and said that when Italy entered the war in 1940, Mussolini ordered Italian airplane factories to begin producing some astronomical number of aircraft each month. To Piaggio came the ukase and with it large supplies of rubber and steel—for the nose-wheels. The wheels began to come off the assembly line in vast quantities.

Due to circumstances beyond Mussolini's control, the number of airplanes manufactured never remotely exhausted the pile-up of nose-wheels. With the war over and people looking for ways of getting around, the Piaggio engineer came up with the idea that if you separated a pair of nose-wheels by a small two-cycle engine, fastened a seat in the middle and another over the engine, you'd have a cheap, small motorcycle which anyone could drive. The Vespa.

The story is typical of Mussolini's Italy, especially in the later years of his 23-year reign. Mussolini commanded but things rarely turned out the way he expected. The superb new biography of Mussolini by Denis Mack Smith* has a story similar to mine. Mussolini went down to impoverished Sicily where he laid the foundation stone of a new town that was to be the first of thousands, each with at least 10,000 inhabitants. The first town, on completion, would be called "Mussolinia." Lots of immediate publicity in the press, but nothing was heard of the project again.

And yet, despite all the weaknesses, the vanity and pomposity, the small-mindedness and vindictiveness of the Italian dictator, he managed somehow to create a minor economic miracle for Italy, something which Mack Smith glosses over. This minor economic miracle was quite real, in fact. As Professor A. James Gregor

**Mussolini*. Alfred A. Knopf, \$20.00.

has noted, the economic performance of Italy during the Fascist era was remarkable since it encompassed "a steady rate of industrialization and economic modernization." Between 1922 and 1938, Fascist Italy had become "an economically mature society." It must be remembered that Italy entered the twentieth century with a narrow industrial base and lacked basic essentials for economic growth—fossil fuels and iron ore. By every index of economic growth, Fascist Italy went through sustained and substantial expansion.

Had Mussolini not been trapped by his arrogance and imperial ambitions, and had he stayed out of the war (as Franco did), Mussolini might today enjoy a posthumous reputation as respectable as the one Lenin enjoys among the Left. →

†July 29, 1983 will be the centenary of Mussolini's birth. There will be no celebration of that event as there was of Lenin's centenary in 1970.