



**AGUIRRE, DER ZORN GOTTES (AGUIRRE, THE WRATH OF GOD) is a February, 2017 LVCA dvd donation to the Ligonier Valley Library of Ligonier, Pennsylvania. Here is Kino Ken's review of that dvd.**

**14 of a total 20 points**

**\*\*\*½ of a possible \*\*\*\*\***

**Peru 1972 color 93 minutes subtitled / dubbed in English live action feature  
epic costume drama Werner Herzog Filmproduktion / Hessischer Rundfunk  
Producers: Daniel Camino, Werner Herzog, Hans Prescher, Lucki Stipetic**

**Key: \*indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance**

**(j) designates a juvenile performer**

**Points:**

- 2 Direction: Werner Herzog**
- 1 Editing: Beate Mainka-Jellinghaus**
- 2 Cinematography: Thomas Mauch\*, Francisco Joán\*,  
Orlando Macchiavello\***
- 2 Lighting**
- 1 Screenplay: Werner Herzog**
- 0 Music: Popol Vuh (Florian Fricke, choir organ and mellotron), Fichelscher  
(acoustic and electric guitars, drums), Djong Yun (vocals),  
Robert Eliscu (oboe, pan pipes)**
- 2 Locations**
- 2 Sound: Bob Oliver\* and Herbert Prasch\***

**0 Acting**  
**2 Creativity**  
**14 total points**

**Cast: Klaus Kinski (Don Lope de Aguirre), Helena Rojo (Inez, mistress of Ursua), Del Negro\* (Fray Gaspar de Carvajal), Ruy Guerra (Don Pedro de Ursua), Peter Berling\* (Don Fernando de Guzman, the Emperor), Cecilia Rivera (j) (Flores, daughter of Don Lope de Aguirre), Daniel Ades (Perucho, a sadistic killer), Edward Roland (Okello, a black slave), Armando Polanah (Armando), Alejandro Repullés (Gonzalo Pizarro), others**  
**Voices Cast: Claus Biederstaedt\* (Fray Gaspar de Carvajal), Lothar Blumhagen (Don Pedro de Ursua), Heinz Theo Branding (Don Fernando de Guzman), Christian Brückner (Balthasar), Michael Chevalier (Conquistador being beheaded), Justo González (González), Uta Hallant (Inez / Flores), Edgar Ott (Gonzalo Pizarro), Uwe Paulsen (Okello), Dieter Ranspach\* (Perucho)**

**Werner Herzog's third feature film delves into the corrupted minds of Spanish conquistadors lured by tales of a golden city deep into the Amazon jungle. Filmed on locations in Peru, it opens with an expedition of soldiers, slaves, translator, priest, and two anomalous females descending from cloud-smothered Andean highlands to a turbulently raging river below. With them is a luxuriously caparisoned steed, sedan chair suitable for jungle princess, barrels of gunpowder, Bible, several pigs, a pygmy sloth, swords, muskets, spears, two cannons, helmets, armor, knives, and hatchets. Led by Gonzalo Pizarro, half-brother to the Inca conqueror, a struggling line of adventurers, servants, and captives inch along a twisty, perilously slick mountain path. Suddenly, a crate tumbles down a ravine, smashing to bits on a destructive journey of its own. Sometime later, a cannon similarly breaks free from restraints and rolls to an explosive demolition.**

**These disasters are accompanied almost solely by trance music performed by Popul Voh, a group headed by Florian Fricke. Haunting initially, these sinisterly suggestive repetitious tones become auditorily stultifying, at odds with the**

trumpet flourishes and pounding drums characteristic of Spanish Renaissance martial music.

This is New Spain as imagined by a twentieth-century mystic steeped in traditions of koans and monastic silences. Enigmatic, fecund, savage, completely uncivilized. Nature as God, not Man, intended. Something requiring conquering by the pious, an immeasurably expansive treasure-house awaiting looting in the name of Spain's distant regent, Felipe II, and the Holy Father in Rome.

Into this latter-day Garden of Eden come intruders determined to bring out whatever mineral wealth and spices the region offers. If natives resist, they will either be massacred or fettered. Incredibly, the same principle gets applied to every member of the oversized party daring to challenge the authority of its lieutenant, Don Lope de Aguirre.

Aguirre was born in Spain's Basque region in 1510, according to Wikipedia. He was accompanied on the Ursua trip by daughter Elvira, rechristened Flores in this film version. Still a teenager, the girl had been liberated from a nunnery.

Suffering from an untreatable 1554 leg wound received while crushing a revolt by Hernandez Girón, Lope de Aguirre is a "wolf" indeed in relationships with those surrounding him. His cruel unpredictability is already legendary. It keeps companions in constant agitation, unsure which of them might become his next target. Though he walks with a pronounced limp, resulting in unevenly sloping shoulders, Aguirre's reputation precludes potential jeers. He's already survived hardships lethal to dozens of seemingly more robust warriors. While his allegiances to superiors are transferable, the veteran explorer apparently has a staunch paternal tie to his daughter, perhaps the sole touch of humanity not yet tainted by greed for power.

Blocked by almost impenetrable vegetation, flooded rivers, and uncharted swamps, Pizarro decides to give his troops a crucial respite. He believes the mud-spewing waterway located beside them to be navigable by raft. Time will certainly be lost in constructing floats. But swift currents would compensate for that once the company was safely aboard and launched. No hostile Indians will be able to reach them effectively with primitive weapons, either. Not so long as their flotilla stays in the middle of the river, avoiding the shore with its plenitude of camouflaging shrubbery and gouging rocks.

But one raft snares in a countercurrent. Unable to break away, its occupants ultimately fall prey to enemies attacking under cover of nightfall. Neither a relief party sent overland to rescue them nor planned assistance from the main group on distantly facing shore reaches victims in time to preserve their lives.

Don Pedro de Ursua, given command of the waterborne group by Pizarro, hopes nonetheless to retrieve the bodies of those slain and give them Christian burial. To Aguirre, this proposal is a complete waste of time and energy. He hints to follower Perucho a cannon shot at the raft might be most desirable. Perucho willingly obliges. He nonchalantly loads, aims, and fires, finishing off what remains of the ill-starred transport and its crew.

Further frustrations of Ursua's directions follow. Men collect iron and cut down trees to build a more capacious and sturdier raft, one capable of holding a cannon and horse, as well as people and supplies.

Their nominal commander attempts to overrule these orders coming from Aguirre. A mutiny develops. Ursua is bound, a loyalist killed outright, another obedient soldier overpowered and caged. Aguirre promotes himself to acting commander. Then he relinquishes power putatively to a puppet ruler, barrel-chested nobleman Don Fernando de Guzman, dubbing him "Emperor of Peru." A cowed assembly seconds the traitor's selection by tentative show of hands, fearing quick reprisal against any overt objections.

The drift downriver becomes progressively slower. A mundane routine of standing sentry, eating, and sleep is broken at intervals by absences of bird calls, each of those a harbinger of imminent secret attack. Poison from coated spearheads reduces ranks of would-be masters. Infighting eliminates weaklings and malcontents. A gluttonous Emperor perishes, slain by unseen foe's well-aimed weapon. His clemency, which to Aguirre's chagrin has kept powerless Ursua alive, comes to an abrupt termination.

Led by Perucho of the ominously repetitive monosyllable, a small detachment of troops convey doomed Don Pedro to a rare stretch of dry, solid land festooned with vines. There they hang Aguirre's only likely rival, while Perucho recites part of the lyrics to a popular song "Estos mis Cabellicos, Madre, Dos a dos me los lleva el Aire."

Historian William Prescott translated those words as follows on page 1185 of the Modern Library version of *The History of the Conquest of Peru*, published in New York, undated: “The wind blows the hairs off my head, mother; Two at a time, it blows them away!” This was reportedly hummed by Licentiate Carbajal, murderer of the Viceroy of Peru in 1547, upon receiving a report confederates had abandoned him. It’s used in the film to indicate the treachery eventually leading to utter isolation and friendlessness of chief plotter Aguirre himself.

Ursua’s mistress, Ines, realizing no defender is left, walks off regally into the jungle, preferring to risk her life with its inhabitants over staying aboard a drifting wooden platform peopled with greedy, homicidal fools.

With no remaining brake on his actions, Aguirre sets fire to an Indian village of cannibals who had earlier ambushed other Spaniards. He also permits a friendly Quechua visitor to be executed on the spot when the illiterate man fecklessly drops the Word of God he’s just attempted in vain to hear by putting it to his ear.

Ever onward into utter blackness of spirit travels Aguirre, the self-styled Wanderer, as devoid of moral responsibility as Joseph Conrad’s Kurtz in “Heart of Darkness.” At this point, he’s totally enslaved by delusions of fame and power.

The historical Aguirre reached the Amazon’s mouth after declaring himself and comrades open rebels against King Felipe II in a 1561 letter translated into English in full at [losttrails.com/pages/Tales/de\\_Aguirre.html](http://losttrails.com/pages/Tales/de_Aguirre.html). It’s decidedly worth reading before passing judgment on the author. The Spanish original, published by Caracas’s Universidad Central de Venezuela in 1961, includes a declaration Aguirre should be recognized as “Prince of Peru, Tierra Firme and Chile” not only by 186 officers and soldiers witnessing its signing, but also by the King of Spain himself.

Archival testimony also exists that Aguirre killed “a woman in league against me” at some point in the later stages of his river journey. She may or may not have been Ines.

Sailing from the Atlantic coast westward, the overreaching monomaniac then attempted to wrest control of Panama from appointed officials. Like his investigation into El Dorado, this undertaking failed. Aguirre was surprised and

encircled at Barquisimeto, Venezuela. Realizing his campaign was hopeless, Don Lope killed his daughter Elvira and a few followers. But not himself. Captured by opponents thereafter, he was shot dead, then beheaded and quartered.

Though Herzog might have been tempted to repeat that climax, given the behavior of his chief actor, AGUIRRE's cast and crew all managed to emerge from relentlessly tortuous experiences alive. Their efforts, unlike those of the film's central character, left behind a creative marvel, one which excites wonder and almost religious respect in viewers encountering it for the first time.

Stunning aerial photography, a 360 degree panoramic sweep around the main raft, prolonged close-ups of turgent headwaters, telephoto shots of nearly indistinct indigenous defenders, overheads of luxuriant jungle canopy – these components of Thomas Mauch's cinematography are as legendary as Kinski's ravings and piercing bird calls from unseen shy creatures.

Given the shooting conditions, clarity of focus throughout the film is amazing. Working with a budget of only about \$370,000, Herzog and his crew produced a film whose technical expertise overshadows the bulk of Hollywood dinosaurs costing more than ten times that amount.

Even stilted, awkward acting of amateurs from the Lauramarca Cooperative doesn't detract much from the impressiveness of AGUIRRE's visuals. Because Herzog believed emphatically in capturing and preserving passion and beauty as it unfolded before his eyes, as in the remarkable butterfly perching on finger scene. Single scene takes were the rule, not the exception, for this production.

Even such looniness as a ship perched in a treetop – suggested by Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca's reported sighting of such a thing on the island of Hispaniola in 1527 (see *La Relacion of de Vaca*), presumably in the aftermath of a hurricane – gains validity because so much is perceived through the deranged eyes of famished, despairing travelers, whose journeys are being revisited.

Herzog's famed black humor crops up periodically, as in a death scene where an expiring rafter comments on the current preference for long spears. This helps mitigate the film's overall tragic atmosphere.

Tossing about quotes and characters with muddling disregard for anachronisms – a not atypical stylistic feature of the director – Werner assigns a journal about Pizarro's 1540 trip to La Canela correctly to Fray Gaspar de

Carvajal but has it incorrectly being authored during the Ursua-led eastern Amazon sources undertaking of 1560. Similarly, he kills middle-aged Dominican Carvajal off in 1561. The real priest lived to reach his eighties and only died in 1584, surviving Aguirre by twenty-three years. Perucho quotes from what might be a pop song or an epigram from the assassin Carvajal (not the same person as the friar). Obviously out of context. Possibly out of period as well.

None of these flaws suffice to remove the film from its position as a milestone in location moviemaking. As a depiction of human avarice, it matches anything yet projected on the screen. Herzog's digs against organized religion and its disrespect of alternatives notwithstanding, AGUIRRE has an underlying spirituality mirrored in the unlikely Ines, herself an inveterate sinner, according to Catholic theology, a violator of the sanctity of church-sanctioned marriage.

AGUIRRE, WRATH OF GOD is superior viewing for teens aged sixteen and older, as well as adults. It includes very violent episodes, one scene of female toplessness, and substantial cynicism.

The Anchor Bay dvd being reviewed has a highly instructive audio commentary with the director, trailers, and biographies of Herzog and Kinski.

AGUIRRE DER ZORN GOTTES must be very highly recommended, especially to anyone jaded by mainstream movie fare.