



Burden of Dreams Discussion Guide

Director: Les Blank

Year: 1982

Time: 95 min

You might know this director from these feature-length documentaries:

All in this Tea (2007)

Innocents Abroad (1991)

J'ai été au bal (1989)

Ry Cooder & The Moula Banda Rhythm (1988)

In Heaven There is No Beer (1984)

Chulas Fronteras (1976)

A Poem is a Naked Person (1974)

And more...

FILM SUMMARY

“Fitzcarraldo” is a classic film, not so much for its story or setting, but for its directorial ambition. Rather than using shortcuts a level-headed director would, Werner Herzog sought out the impossible, painstakingly turning it into reality. The documentary BURDEN OF DREAMS tracks the nearly five years it took to make the unreal real.

Blood was shed, lives were indirectly lost, arguments erupted, equipment was shattered, friendships were strained, and dreams were doubted, even by Herzog: “I am running out of fantasy.” But somehow his great dream was completed and “Fitzcarraldo,” the story of a rubber baron intent to bring opera to the deepest Amazon jungle and hoist a giant of a ship over a mountain, hit the silver screen in 1982.

BURDEN OF DREAMS does more than recount the trials Herzog and team encountered; it digs beneath the troubled surface and tells all. Speaking to both the western film team and the indigenous Peruvian people involved in the production, it shows how both sides endured for months on end in their makeshift film camps, how the local women made the homebrewed masato so their men could perform, how petulant Klaus Kinski remained his tumultuous self miles from home, how prostitutes sated the Western staff, and how the director himself swung up and down in his moods—kicking a soccer ball with the locals, standing knee-deep in stubborn mud, battling logistics with engineers, cameramen, and local friars. Finally, it features Herzog’s dance with the roaring jungle, his love/hate relationship with mighty Amazon, that was devotedly pursued until the final shot.

Director Wes Blank exposes the weight and sacrifice of dreams, but leaves it to the viewer to decide what they think about Herzog. Is he a madman, a genius, a voice for the artist, an agent of beauty waging war against the dilution of Western society, or simply the director of the 1982 classic “Fitzcarraldo?”

FILM THEMES

PURSUIT OF DREAMS

Herzog had a dream, and although the forces against him were numerous—local community struggles, illness, weather complications, location difficulties, loss of investors, staff morale—he was unwilling to sacrifice his goal. Just as the central metaphor of “Fitzcarraldo” involved taking a risk and doing the impossible, so was Herzog’s mission to complete the film. In many ways, the central figure in the film mirrored Herzog himself: a fanatic, a madman, determined to beat the odds, silencing his adversaries. Despite the mounting evidence to abandon ship, Herzog put his dream first, proving that anything is possible, as long as you are willing to sacrifice and then sacrifice again.

ROLE OF THE ARTIST

Herzog is an artist in the truest sense. On a constant hunt for magic, he holds to his belief that creators of art are agents bearing society’s inner voice, keeping us connected to our subconscious selves. In his words, “We have to articulate ourselves. Otherwise we would be cows in a field.” He saw his role as an essential one, and his work as a means of lifting humans to a higher level. As with many artists, his road—the unbeaten path—was filled with doubt and obstacles. Labeled a madman and a genius, he never takes shortcuts and always seeks out the unique underlying characteristics in life. Herzog unveils the true colors of life hidden beneath the surface.

CULTURE CLASH

By choosing to film in Amazonia—an ancient jungle home to earth’s few remaining indigenous tribes—Herzog chose a treacherous route. Ever-steady in his quest for the authentic, and in his battle to capture the genuine spirit of the location, Herzog chose to separate the Western staff and local actors into two different camps. “I did not want to have them ‘contaminated’ by Western culture.” But culture clashes were bound to develop when two very different realities met, especially given the inherent power imbalance. We may all be human, but as the filming of Fitzcarraldo bore witness to, we handle the journey of life in different ways.

HUMAN VS. NATURE

“Fitzcarraldo” could have been filmed in a year, but it took nearly five. The primary reason for such delay? The jungle. Herzog contemplated the circumstances time and again. “We are challenging nature itself and it hits back. We have to accept that it is much stronger than we are.” Despite all of his best efforts, his analytics, calculations, and advanced technology, the power of nature could and did flatten everything in a moment, pummeling his work to the ground, enforcing extensive waiting periods and reminding everyone just what is in charge after all. “We are cursed with what we are doing here,” Herzog admitted. The jungle, and its many hidden strengths and unpredictable ways, took the upper hand, co-directing what became “Fitzcarraldo.”

“If I abandon this project, I would be a man without dreams. I don’t want to live like that. I live my life—I end my life—with this project.”

Werner Herzog

“If we have to push the boat, the owner should be there behind it too. If we die, he should die too.”

Local Peruvian actor

“Everyday life is only an illusion behind which lies the reality of dreams.”

Werner Herzog

FILM FACTS:

- BURDEN OF DREAMS has won a few awards, including the Flaherty Documentary Award at the BAFTAs the year after it was released, as well as being nominated for Best Edited Documentary by American Cinema Editors. “Fitzcarraldo,” on the other hand, was nominated for a BAFTA and an Academy Award, while Werner Herzog won an award for Best Director at Cannes Film Festival.
- Considered to be one of the greatest names in New German Cinema, Werner Herzog was born in 1942 in Munich, Germany. His surname—which he inherited from his father—means “duke,” a name he saw fitting for a filmmaker. He is known to use locals in his films in order to benefit from “ecstatic truth,” where the individuals play a role as well as acting as themselves. He made his first film at the age of 19, and in addition to film work, he has also written a number of operas and books. Herzog’s filmic repertoire includes “Grizzly Man” and “My Best Fiend,” about his turbulent relationship with Klaus Kinski.
- BURDEN OF DREAMS was released just two months after “Fitzcarraldo.”
- Herzog kept none of the footage shot of actors Robards and Jagger. The footage in BURDEN OF DREAMS is all that remains of the early filming.
- The Amazon rainforest is spread over nine nations, with 60 percent belonging to Brazil, 13 percent Peru, 10 percent Colombia, and the rest in Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia, Guyana, Suriname, and French Guiana.
- BURDEN OF DREAMS director Les Blank was born in 1935 in Florida. After a short stint creating films for business and industry, he established his own production company—Flower Films—and went on to produce many films, mainly music documentaries, and all independently funded. After watching Ingmar Bergman’s “The Seventh Seal,” he was determined to get into filmmaking. Blank died of cancer in 2013. His son, Harrod Blank, is also a documentary filmmaker.
- Having established a friendship a few years beforehand, Herzog invited Blank to join him in Peru to film the making of “Fitzcarraldo.”
- Known as “masato” in Amazonia and Peru, this fermented alcoholic beverage made out of yucca root (or cassava) is known as “chicha” in the rest of South America. The drink is only prepared by women, who chew the peeled root and spit the remaining juices into a bowl. The liquid is then allowed to ferment, and wild yeast is added in order to convert it into alcohol. Children are given unfermented masato, while women and men drink the fermented version. The drink fermented the longest is saved for men.
- The Amazon, the largest and most biodiverse of all tropical rainforests, has been in existence for 55 million years. The region is home to 2.5 million insect species and 2,000 birds and mammals.
- Klaus Kinski was in his mid-50s during the filming of “Fitzcarraldo.” He died at the age of 65.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. **Learn** more about the extensive output of Werner Herzog. If you have the interest and opportunity, attend the [Rogue Film School](#), a series of weekend film seminars led by Herzog himself.
2. **Act** to preserve the Amazon rainforest. To cut back on some of the threats facing “the lungs of the earth,” reduce both your paper and oil consumption. Learn more through [Greenpeace](#).
3. **Adopt** your own acre of rainforest, helping to protect it, by supporting the [Rainforest Alliance Network](#).
4. **Give** voice to your inner artist, or encourage others who have an artistic vision but not yet the courage to release it. As Herzog stated, “We have to articulate ourselves—otherwise we would be cows in a jungle.”

We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter, pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.