Identity (De-)Formation in the Jungles of the Amazon: A Character Study

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IDENTITY (DE-) FORMATION IN THE JUNGLES OF THE AMAZON:

A CHARACTER STUDY

By

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the relationship between identity and the Amazonian Rainforest focusing on the identities of the fictionalized characters of Alexander von Humboldt, Lope de Aguirre and Fitzcarraldo as they are to be found in the literary work of Daniel Kehlmann (Die Vermessung der Welt) and in the films of Werner Herzog (Aguirre, Wrath of God and Fitzcarraldo). The analysis focuses on the identity formations/deformations the characters undergo along their journeys through the jungle and specifically on how the jungle guides and shapes their identities; the end results of their respective journeys of identity formation/deformation depending then on their interaction with the jungle itself and the relationship they establish with it.
The ever-elusive topic of identity, what it is and how it is shaped, molded and created has long been an important theme throughout literary history. Thomas Szasz, a psychiatrist and academic, stated in his book ‘The Second Sin’ that “people often say that this or that person has not yet found himself. But the self is not something one finds, it is something one creates.”¹ In this sense, Wilhelm von Humboldt, an important historical figure whose career has left an inherent imprint on German thought and culture, also believed that a person’s self identity was something that needed to be created and molded, that one had to work hard to develop and shape one’s identity. In his essay entitled Theorie der Bildung des Menschen, he states how man is an organism dynamic in his skills and potentials and characterized by his energy (die Kraft). This energy is inherent in every “Mensch” and is the driving force necessary for man’s inward development, his “Bildung.” Becoming ones true self is no easy task and yet it is critical to our attaining any perspective on our personhood, on establishing whom we are as individuals and in determining our purpose in living.

This concept or construct of the ‘self’ is formed in the process of daily life. We automatically detect, select and organize information we receive from our interactions with the people and objects around us. We retain what we deem necessary to our person, adopting and adding this new information to what we have already stored, processed and incorporated into our being. Consequently we are forever reshaping and remolding our identities. In other words, the ‘self’ is shaped by the cultural contexts wherein social interaction takes place, or in some extreme cases in which it does not take place. The process of building one’s identity becomes

then an experience, an investigation of sorts, by which we come to understand the meaning of our lives and what we as individuals signify and what our life itself encompasses.

But how does one go about shaping one’s identity, or building it, as Humboldt would say? The classic example used to relate the process by which we go about forming such an identity is the ‘journey.’ Life itself can be a journey but more often than not, transcendental or physical journeys take people to far away places where they meet new people, experience new ways of life and in the process their identities are transformed, reshaped by their experiences. Such journeys can be seen not only in life but also in literature and film, where it is a common occurrence for the main character to embark upon a quest, affording him the necessary experiences and/or situations to shape his self-identity. This theme dates back to ancient times, Homer’s *The Odyssey*, which follows the adventures of the Greek hero Odysseus, an example of just such a quest. In this study I will focus on the three literary/cinematographic characters of Lope de Aguirre (as presented in Herzog’s 1972 film entitled *Aguirre: Zorn des Gottes*), Fitzcarraldo (as depicted in Herzog’s 1982 film *Fitzcarraldo*) and Alexander von Humboldt (as portrayed in Daniel Kehlmann’s 2006 novel *Die Vermessung der Welt*).

Kehlmann, in his novel *Die Vermessung der Welt*, reinvents the 19th century Prussian aristocrat, scientist and researcher, Alexander von Humboldt, as a witty, ahead-of-his-time (and yet rather socially handicapped) explorer determined to uncover the secrets of the Amazonian rainforest. In ‘Fitzcarraldo,’ the German director and producer Werner Herzog takes us along for a ride following the dreams of an Irishman named Fitzcarraldo as he attempts to bring the opera to the most unlikely and seemingly hostile of places, the jungle. The fictional character based on the historical figure of Lope de Aguirre found in Werner Herzog’s film adaptation ‘Aguirre: Zorn des Gottes,’ recaptures the fiery spirit of the 16th century Spanish Conquistador
on his march towards independence from the Spanish monarchy, bringing to life the gradual collapse of Aguirre into insanity, in conjunction with the omnipresent characteristics of the Amazon.

Whilst these three characters travel and live out their respective adventures, another guiding theme can be seen throughout these works in the representation of nature. All three men find themselves in the midst of the Amazonian rainforest of South America, their lives drawn to it for differing reasons. The natural world, however, does not simply serve as a passive participant within the greater plot of the story, a backdrop against which the characters act out their scenes. Nature is instead a vital component that not only influences the direction of the plot but also the identity formation (or deformation) of the characters themselves, whether they develop in closer keeping to her, yielding to her power, or whether they struggle against her.

These characters are however reinvented novelistic constructs of authentic historical figures, novelistic constructs that are in essence highly embellished and re-envisioned takes on reality. The authors of these works draw basis in reality but in no way mimic it precisely, taking many artistic liberties in order to recount the stories of their characters. Consequently, it is important to note here that the character study I carry out in this paper is based almost exclusively on the fictional versions of Humboldt, Fitzcarraldo and Aguirre and the experiences they go through along their journeys of self-formation within the world of fiction, and not on the historical figures themselves as they are to be found in historical chronicles and in their own writings. That said, in their reinvented fictional lives their journeys are, beneath the obvious political, cultural and scientific agendas, in actuality journeys of the self, of building and molding one’s identity. Their journeys carry them physically across foreign countries and
landscapes as well as mentally and psychologically towards the individuals they will eventually become.

Before delving into their journeys of self-discovery however, it is essential to understand that such a journey is not usually made with the explicit intention of finding oneself; rather the journey occurs while the character is busy upon some other task. The journey becomes a subconscious venture into the hidden territories of the human heart and spirit. In his *Eudaimonic Identity Theory: Identity as Self-Discovery*, Alan Waterman, a well-known researcher and psychologist, delves into eudaimonistic identity theory in order to answer the question of how people construct their daimon or “true self”. He relates how the goals of identity formation include the recognition of one’s own inherent capabilities and potentials along with the seeking out of opportunities that allow the individual to act upon and use said capabilities. In so doing, a person acquires a clear sense of definition, senses his own uniqueness, and becomes confident in himself as an individual and in his personal future.

In this process of self-formation, a person establishes a goal to which he/she is then invested and committed to. In the cases of Alexander von Humboldt, Fitzcarraldo and Aguirre, their personal motivations for embarking on their respective journeys represent and embody their goals. Once committed, the person engages in activity directed towards the implementation of said goal, which naturally leads him/her to the fulfillment of the goal. Along the way, the wheels of identity-formation are set into motion, ever turning and pushing forward, all the while shaping, challenging, reshaping and firmly establishing the individual’s identity.

Wilhelm von Humboldt, 200 years earlier, argued much the same idea stating that: “Die letzte Aufgabe unsres Daseins: dem Begriff der Menschheit in unsrer Person […] durch die Spuren des lebendigen Wirkens, die wir zurücklassen, einen so großen Inhalt, als möglich, zu
verschaffen, diese Aufgabe löst sich allein durch die Verknüpfung unsres Ichs mit der Welt […].
Dieses allein ist nun auch der eigentliche Maßstab zur Beurteilung.”

In other words, we as humans have the duty to explore and create within ourselves the definition and essence of what it means to be human. This goal, this purpose in life, can only be fulfilled when one creates and solidifies a true connection with the world and one’s surroundings, drawing upon everything available to us and left to us by previous civilizations. A solid education is key to creating and shaping oneself. The path taken towards personal self-formation is of course different for everyone and brings with it changes in perspective and particularly in one’s evaluation of oneself; changes which are acquired as a result of the challenges, obstacles and experiences faced upon the journey.

In Kehlmann’s novelistic representation of Alexander von Humboldt’s life, self-formation for Alexander arrives through the process of ethnographic exposure to the geography and native inhabitants of the Amazon. It is a subtle awareness that blooms slowly throughout the two-year period in the Amazonian chapter of his scientific expedition. While Wilhelm might have understood and accepted his younger brother’s desire to explore his environs, Alexander’s expedition was driven purely by an earnest scientific impulse, his desires radically more inclined towards that of scientific endeavor. The need to understand and acquire a better understanding of the workings of the natural world and uncover the source of its unity in the apparent chaos was what Alexander desired above all else; an undertaking that provided him with the opportunity to develop, reshape and solidify his own unique identity, not only as a “German” but also, unbeknownst to him, as a central figure of German classicism and humanism.

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Driven by purely cultural interests, Fitzcarraldo on the other hand struggles against the forces of the jungle, his identity seemingly progressing from dreamer, to obsessed businessman, to resigned victim/entrepreneur as he battles against the forces of nature; his perseverance remaining unshattered throughout. Hundreds of years earlier, Aguirre’s identity is far more aggressive in its formation/deformation. In contrast to Alexander von Humboldt and Fitzcarraldo, Aguirre’s journey through the wilds of the Amazon is based solely on a desire for political and economic gain. In the circumstances he finds himself in, Aguirre seizes his chance for vengeance, consequently bringing about the becoming of his own brutal self.

All three, although for vastly differing motives, set out to conquer the wild and imposing Amazonian landscape only to find that her powers could not or would not be harnessed. In this paper I offer a comparison of the journeys of the three men, analyzing how each of their respective forays into the jungles of the Amazon served in shaping their (fictional) identities. Far from attempting to define identity, I will instead focus on the effects of the jungle on the European identity and how they develop in the confines of the jungles of South America; namely how the circumstances of their quests ultimately provided the mold used in building the figures they became. To do this I will also take a look at the state of their self-perceptions of who and what they were before they encountered the Amazon.

Does the Amazon drive Aguirre, Fitzcarraldo and Humboldt’s identity formation and if so to what extent? How do they shape and mold their new or more complex identities at an individual level and what role, whether positive or negative, does the jungle play in that formation? What is the eventual outcome of their formations? And on a broader, more generalized scale, how do these identities compare to their original European identities, and in
the case of Humboldt, specifically to his German identity in relation to the “Bildung” theories espoused by his own brother Wilhelm von Humboldt as well as his own notions of “Bildung”? 
ALEXANDER VON HUMBOLDT: THE EXPLORER

From my earliest days I felt the urge to travel to distant lands seldom visited by Europeans. This urge characterizes a moment when our life seems to open before us like a limitless horizon in which nothing attracts us more than intense mental thrills and images of positive danger.³

-- Alexander von Humboldt

To relate Alexander von Humboldt’s journey of identity formation as he hiked his way through the tangles of the jungle and sailed down her expansive rivers, one must ascertain an understanding of his person before his life-altering journey. Born in 1769 into a Prussian family of considerable means, Alexander von Humboldt along with his elder brother, Wilhelm von Humboldt, were educated to the highest standards of their time. Despite the similar liberal education both boys received, Alexander was always more attune to the workings of nature, drawn to all things related to botany, mineralogy, and the natural sciences to name a few. Wilhelm himself in a personal letter written in 1804 explained the difference he saw between himself and his younger brother writing, “Since our childhood, we have moved poles apart although we have always remained fond of each other […] From an early age, his inclination has been to the outside world, while I preferred the inner life, even when I was very young.”⁴ Alexander himself in the forward of his Personal Narrative, a detailed account in which he relates his time spent in South America, also conveys this enthusiasm. He states: “From my earliest days I was excited by studying nature, and was sensitive to the wild beauty of a

landscape bristling with mountains and covered forests."\(^{5}\) Such a penchant for exploration and travel, although clearly personally pleasurable, was in fact twofold, his main reason that of contributing to the progress of the physical sciences. These objectives were likely inherited from the accounts of other fantastical explorations and expeditions of famous European explorers such as the British explorer James Cook or the French geographer Charles Marie de La Condamine, of whom Alexander had read about during his childhood. As Caroline Schaumann most aptly relates in her article, *Who Measures the World? Alexander von Humboldt’s Chimborazo Climb in Literary Imagination*, “Humboldt’s *Wanderlust* was steeped in the Romantic ideal of travel and exploration.”\(^{6}\) Most probably not even the torrid legend of Lope de Aguirre escaped his inquisitive and voracious mind.

**A. The Brothers von Humboldt and the Concept of ‘Bildung’**

Alexander’s drive for investigatory enterprise was naturally linked to his intellectual background and the liberal education he received growing up in German thought and European science as a whole. Particularly in the field of natural sciences, great transformations were making their way through Europe. New ideas, espoused by such renowned philosophers as Immanuel Kant and Johann Reinhold Forster, structured themselves around the inherent unity they saw within nature. They argued that each individual specimen was somehow linked to the next and that this harmonious unity was unique to each region with each region having it’s own distinct natural units. This vision of “a complete historical geography of the earth and all it’s

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productions” became a central theme for Alexander, exploration being the key component of natural inquiry. He states, “I shall endeavor to find out how nature’s forces act upon each other, and in what manner the geographic environment exerts its influence on animals and plants. In short, I must find out about the harmony in nature.”

Alexander’s claim to travel as a means of expanding one’s horizons, of acquiring knowledge for the betterment of oneself and more importantly for the sake of science and society as a whole was not entirely in keeping with his brother’s notion of education and ‘Bildung’. In stark contrast with his younger brother, Wilhelm describes in his essay *Theorie der Bildung des Menschen* that for the individual to truly develop, appropriate outlets must be found that engage him and allow him to reach his full potential, thus increasing his abilities and solidifying his self.

As a major component in the process of the development of the self, education must aim at providing an environment in which the student feels free to hone his unique characteristics, allowing him to shape his identity, consequently resulting in his person becoming a contributing member of society. Self-cultivation is key in this process, which need be pursued through absorption of the massive quantity of material afforded to him by the world around him. This material, this appropriate outlet, this environment, should fore and foremost direct itself towards the study of the Classics, their language and culture. In his essay *Über den Charakter der Griechen* he states, “Das Gefühl für das Altertum ist also der Prüfstein der modernen Nationen.”

For Wilhelm, when comparing his times, which he characterized as having been alienated from nature and from man’s own humanity, to those of the ancient Greeks, whom he characterized as

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being ideal in both their attained freedom and beauty, saw in the Greeks the striving and yearning he considered as being the highest aspect of human inclination. This yearning, this ‘Trieb’, should be at the very core and foundation of a well-rounded and meaningful education, for it is this ‘Trieb’ that serves “das Höchste in der geistigen, als das Einfachste in der körperlichen Natur zu erklären.”\(^\text{10}\) In other words, a detailed and earnest contemplation of the Greeks is an integral means by which a person can bring forth his inherent abilities and gifts, his ‘Kraft’, and truly attain the ultimate goal of understanding his innermost inclinations and forces and ultimately to hold within himself the essence of what it truly means to be human, the essence of human existence.

Wilhelm’s own childhood education consisted of heavy amounts of the classics from Vergil and Horace to Homer through Aeschylus and Plato. One could, however, not study the Ancients properly without first mastering their language, an endeavor Wilhelm took on with much ‘Trieb’ and ‘Sehnsucht’, eventually shaping himself into one of the founders of comparative philology.\(^\text{11}\) To Wilhelm, philology, in ancient Greek “love of words”, and linguistic knowledge were not only crucial to the understanding of the Greeks, but in end effect to the understanding of ourselves as individuals. In his essay entitled Über die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues und ihren Einfluss auf die geistige Entwicklung des Menschengeschlechts, he relates how language is the soul of a people, of an individual, for it is through language that one expresses one’s existence and understanding. And it is through the intense study of languages alone that one acquires a wealth of all-encompassing knowledge. It is an indispensable factor in the development of human intellectual achievement, of ‘menschliche


Bildung.’ He states, „Die Hervorbringung der Sprache ist ein inneres Bedürfnis der Menschheit, nicht bloß ein äußerliches zur Unterhaltung gemeinschaftlichen Verkehrs, sondern ein in ihrer Natur selbst liegendes, zur Entwicklung ihrer geistigen Kräfte und zur Gewinnung einer Weltanschauung [...]”\(^\text{12}\)

For Wilhelm, language was not simply a tool developed to facilitate communication. Language held a much deeper and intense purpose, namely that of being a means of achieving and developing ones mental and spiritual agencies, ones strengths. Language produces and inspires conviction of and in life itself.

Thusly, the study of the Greeks and their language (as well as any language for that matter) allowed for true moral freedom and harmony of man’s innermost being, his inner precision and beauty. It is no wonder then that Wilhelm considered himself and his brother as being so inherently different from one another. For whilst Wilhelm’s concept of self-formation was inclined towards man’s inner harmony, the process of educational enlightenment being that of a more personal nature, reflecting back towards the purity of the Ancients and driven by the desire to understand man’s internal forces and inner development, Alexander’s notions of ‘Bildung’ centered entirely on exploration, on understanding not what lay within man but what lay around him, beneath him and above him, in essence: Nature. For Alexander, nature was an inextricable, an inseparable component from the study of man’s inner development, whether it be linked to the material, social or cultural contexts of life. The intellectual delight and moral freedom Wilhelm sought within man, Alexander sought upon the explorations of his environs, of the Amazon. His ‘Sehnsucht’ and ‘Trieb’ centered on comprehending the phenomena of the physical world and the desire to represent nature as one unit, everything interwoven and interlocking.

\(^{12}\) Wilhelm von Humboldt. Über die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaus. (1836) 2.
This urge, this ‘Sehnsucht’, is expressed clearly in his essay entitled *Kosmos* in which he states: „So war doch immer der eigentliche Zweck des Erlernens ein höherer. Was mir den Hauptantrieb gewährte, war das Bestreben die Erscheinungen der körperlichen Dinge in ihrem allgemeinen Zusammenhange, die Natur als ein durch innere Kräfte bewegtes und belebtes Ganze aufzufassen.”¹³ For Alexander, ‘Bildung’ centered on an earnest endeavor to study nature in all it’s vivid animation and grandeur; development focused on a better understanding of the universe and it’s interlocking connections that would in turn lead to a better understanding of the self and humanity as a whole. Nature, for Alexander, was an entity in and of itself, living and breathing and capable of speaking and communicating with those who were interested enough to stop and listen to her words of wisdom. Nature was an essential part of natural inquiry and to that extent an integral component in the process of comprehending and understanding the general human condition.

The importance of languages was however not lost upon Alexander, whom upon studying the interactions between the missionaries and the native populations of the Amazon ascertained that greater communication and affability between the two vastly different cultures could have made more headway if the invading Europeans had simply given more credit to the languages of the Indians. He states: “If man’s individuality is reflected in his dialects, then these in their turn influence thoughts and feelings. The intimate link between language, national character and physical constitution ensures the differences […] of the tribes, which in turn constitutes an unending source of movement and life at the mental level.”¹⁴ Much like Wilhelm, Alexander also recognized the importance of a language to a people. He too perceived the relationship between a

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person’s language and his overall self-identity. Unfortunately for the Indians, once converted and “civilized”, they seemed to transform into hollowed out shells of their former vibrancy, a direct consequence of loosing not only their native language but also their individuality and national identity along with it. Despite the magnitude of the role played by language in the lives of humans, Alexander noted as well that not even language was immune to the influences of nature: „Der Menschen Rede wird durch alles belebt, was auf Naturwahrheit hindeutet: sei es [...] oder des tief bewegten Gedanken und innerer Gefühle.“\footnote{Alexander von Humboldt. \textit{Ansichten der Natur}. (Reclam, 2004) 206.} Language is, in essence, at the mercy of nature in that it is a verbal representation of nature itself, as humans interpret and perceive her.

The native populations of the Amazon naturally understood and felt this draw of ‘nature’ as well, for even when they lived within the confines of a settlement, learning the ways of the Europeans, they retained within themselves an irresistible ‘Sehnsucht’ to return to the jungle and to her comforts. Alexander compares this drive with that of the European passion for hunting or other such sports. It is “the charm of solitude, the innate desire for freedom, and the deep impressions felt whenever man is alone in contact with nature”\footnote{Alexander von Humboldt. \textit{Personal Narrative}. (London: Penguin, 1995) 123.} that draw man to her and so naturally to his own self formation.

This polarity between the elder and the younger von Humboldt is quite evident in their works published later in their lives, but contrary to this academic polarity they grew up quite close,\footnote{Helmut de Terra. \textit{Humboldt; the Life and times of Alexander Von Humboldt, 1769-1859}. (New York: Knopf, 1955) Ch. 1.} each understanding and accepting the other’s strengths and driving motives. They were educated together first at home and then at private school and later on even at the same university. Contact between the two remained constant throughout their lives and Alexander, upon his many expeditions, wrote to Wilhelm often, relating his experiences and sharing his
thoughts. A novelistic recreation of their relationship is humorously portrayed in Kehlmann’s novel as well, in which the differences in their personalities are very aptly described: “‘The one should be educated to be a man of culture, and the other a man of science,’ stated Kunth”, their tutor. Alexander, on the one hand, if left to his own devices, tended to wander away into the woods collecting all manner of insects and plants so as to study them more closely- an oddity of habit that never ceased to perplex and annoy his tutors and worry his mother. On the other hand Wilhelm dedicated himself wholeheartedly to his education in languages, the Classics, philosophy, mathematics and the like. He was the star pupil, the favorite.

Because of these differences in interests and academic aptitude, in Kehlmann’s fictional adaptation, a childish rivalry is established between the brothers. Wilhelm on numerous occasions is portrayed as somewhat of a bully, luring Alexander into traps and then blaming him for any mishap; for example when Wilhelm shut Alexander in a small closet and left him there until the next day only to tell everyone that Alexander had done it himself. As the plot develops and the story progresses however, this almost toxic rivalry gradually solidifies into mutual respect, both brothers appreciative of the contributions of the other.

In real life however, in spite of the difference in approach to ‘Bildung’ and self identity- Wilhelm’s focus being on the study of the unity of human nature and Alexander’s focus being on the study of the unity to be found in the chaos of nature- Wilhelm’s example and advice were guiding forces for Alexander and his inner growth. His ambitions and desires drove him to travel the world and more specifically the Amazonian jungles during his expedition to South America. The urge he felt, the attraction he felt for “intense mental thrills and images of positive danger” is what characterizes this period in his life and much of the entirety of his life, pushing him ever

forward and onward. His brother Wilhelm approved of his motives for abandoning Europe, as Alexander himself states in his *Personal Narrative* and with this state of mind, with this perception of the world and a desire to have nature work for his purposes, Alexander embarked upon his journey of science on the 5th of June, 1799, sailing forth into the unknown jungles of the Amazon knowing that his journey would be of great importance. He later related in his writings: “The moment of leaving Europe for the first time is impressive. […] Separated from the objects of our dearest affections, and entering into a new life, we are forced to fall back on ourselves”.

**B. Kehlmann’s Alexander**

It is this enthusiastic and fervor-driven Alexander that the reader is introduced to in *Die Vermessung der Welt*; a character Kehlmann, in mixing both fact and fiction (and to whom the genuine ‘past’ functions as a mere backdrop) nicely captures and portrays as an entitled and educated European gentleman (with many stereotypical German attributes) out in search for that which interweaves and interlocks all of the various units of nature together. In Kehlmann’s essay entitled *Wo ist Carlos Montúfar?* in which he explains his reasoning for deciding to fictionalize Alexander’s excursion and include only one of the many research companions Alexander in actuality took with him at the time, namely to include only Áime Bonpland, Kehlmann describes ‘his Alexander’ as “sich in Gesellschaft eines uniformierten, unverwüstlichen, ständig begeisterten und an jeder Kopflaus, jedem Stein und jedem Erdloch interessierten Preußen.”

Life is what Alexander wanted to concern himself with. His only desire was to approach the world from an empirical standpoint so as to measure and describe it with definitive and factual data. “Er wolle das Leben erforschen, die seltsame Hartnäckigkeit verstehen, mit der es den

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Globus umspanne. Er wolle ihm auf die Schliche kommen!" There is no doubt that his scientific expedition produced a plentitude of breakthrough research in the field of Natural Science, however one question does remain. How much did the jungle influence him in turn?

A foreshadowing of the intensity with which the jungle would influence his self-formation is to be found in his first major encounter with the Amazon, an encounter that left him rather speechless and emotionally awed. It is a moment of wonder and Alexander was indeed surprised by the riches he encountered, the natural riches. Kehlmann, subordinating historical accuracy and instead opting for dreamlike and fantastical retellings, paints a tantalizing image of the moment in which Alexander, upon landing in South America, comes into contact with the largest tree he had yet to lay eyes on- a tree Alexander does not mention in his actual works. The “Drachenbaum” seemed to have warded off time, standing year after year, century after century in all it’s majesty, the secrets of the jungle and of the harmony within nature that Alexander was determined to unravel embedded within her aging branches and steadfast roots. Humboldt, tenderly touching and stroking the ancient trunk, reminisces on how “Alles starb, alle Menschen, alle Tiere, immerzu. Nur einer nicht.” Nature was the one constancy in this physical world and he had come face to face with her power and immortality.

In his own ethnographic accounts, Alexander also described the moment a traveler first steps into the South American jungle. He states “he sees nature in a completely unexpected guise. The objects that surround him only faintly bring to mind those descriptions by famous writers […].” Alexander continues his report describing how the traveler is so overwhelmed by the lush greenery, the diversity and vibrancy of life and the juxtaposition between on the one

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hand, the complete silence one can find within the jungle to, on the other hand, the cacophony of sound made by the animals, the waters and the plants as well, that he does not know how to react, what to absorb, what to feel or smell, nor what to listen to.

Thereafter, Kehlmann’s fantastic narrative depicts an obsessive Alexander during his first undertakings upon his quest for knowledge. His experiences come in varying degrees of intensity and naturally of personal enjoyment. For months he deals with the difficult and exhausting trials and tribulations inherent with jungle life, habitual evils as Alexander describes them in his ethnographic journals, and which include the incessant annoyance at the swarms of insects, the superstitions of the natives and their penchant for the telling of outlandish tales (a point he could not understand since a moral never seemed to be found at the end of the story), and the seemingly infiniteness of the rivers and tributaries (in particular the Orinoco). Alexander, in his own writings, recounts in Ansichten der Natur how impenetrable the jungle was at times to the point that even the mighty jaguars lose themselves “in so undurchdringliche Teile der Waldung, dass sie auf dem Boden nicht jagen können.”25 All the while he meticulously measured and calculated every nuke and cranny, lowering himself into volcanoes, exposing himself to the extreme cold of snow covered mountains and the endless onslaught of mosquitos, which according to one of the guides never died and were put on this earth for the sole purpose of plaguing mankind. And indeed they plagued Alexander night and day with no reprieve. He was not even free from the fleas, which at one point had made a new home beneath his toenails. Having said that, at a deeper foundational level, his (reinvented) explorations encompassed an acclimatization, both physically and mentally, to his new environment.

This acclimatization came in varying forms, either from his own observations or from the jungle and it’s inhabitants. One such incident in particular stands out and seems to have been of psychological importance. Recreating the account of Alexander’s run in with a jaguar with much flare, Kehlmann describes how whilst collecting flora specimens, Alexander finds himself face to face with a jaguar, it’s lazy stance and penetrating gaze belying the ferociousness of the creature. “Das Tier hob den Kopf und sah ihn an. […] Humboldt wurde starr. Nach sehr langer Zeit legte es den Kopf auf die Vorderpfoten. […] Der Jaguar sah ihn aufmerksam, ohne den Kopf zu heben, an. Sein Schwanz schlug nach einer Fliege. Humboldt drehte sich um. Er horchte, aber er hörte nichts hinter sich. Mit angehaltenem Atem, […] ging er los.”

Startled from his foraging and collecting, Alexander fearfully flees towards the embankment, all the while pleading and hoping that the enormous feline would not decide to pursue him. It is no wonder he was struck with such fear for the jaguar is both a powerful and beautiful creature, comfortable not only on land but also swimming in the fertile waters of the various tributaries. In Amazonian mythology, the jaguar has long been revered by the native populations as being not only a powerful animal, but also as being a supernatural creature, embodying the beauty, power, cunning and mystery of the Amazon herself. Deity in it’s own right, hundreds of myths surround its mysteriousness. In one particular myth reported by Paul Musilli in his article The importance of the Jaguar and the Cayman in South American Iconography, Religion, Cosmology, in which the natives explain how honey came to be given to them, “we not only discover that honey was given to the Indians by jaguars, but we also understand that these jaguars are to be feared, are capable of supernatural powers, and are invulnerable.”

Alexander’s encounter with the jaguar thusly is a significant experience, an almost one-on-one exchange between the embodiment of the jungle and Alexander himself. Just as the jaguar seemingly mystically appeared out of nowhere, so too is the jungle omnipresent, a constant, dangerous and oppressive companion. The jaguar, in this meeting with Alexander, graciously allows him to run back to his companion unharmed, leaving him only with the shame he felt in demonstrating fear as it lazily gazed at him making his escape, its tail swishing back and forth as it hung off the large branch it was resting on.

Alexander’s own account in his Personal Narrative differs slightly. “[…] my stroll almost cost me my life. I had been constantly looking towards the river, and then, […] I also spotted fresh jaguar tracks […]. The animal had gone off into the jungle, and as I looked in that direction I saw it lying down under the thick foliage of a ceiba, eighty steps away from me. Never has a tiger seemed so enormous. There are moments in life when it is useless to call on reason. I was very scared. However, I was sufficiently in control of myself to remember what the Indians had advised us to do in such circumstances. I carried on walking, without breaking into a run or moving my arms, and thought I noticed that the wild beast had its eye on a herd of capybaras swimming in the river. The further away I got the more I quickened my pace. […] I reached the launch panting and told my adventure story to the Indians, who did not give it much importance.” 28 Whilst the understanding of potential danger is clear in both accounts (despite the fact that the plentitude of food to be had meant that jaguars rarely hunted humans), Alexander retells the story of his meeting with “die größte und blutgierigste Abart” 29 with decidedly more confidence in his own capabilities of escaping unscathed. Armed with the advice the Indians had given him about what to do when caught in such a predicament, he calmly walks

away, asserting that the large feline appeared to be more interested in the herd of capybaras swimming in the river than in his physical person. Although he considered the incident as warranting some congratulations, the Indians were not impressed when he told them of his latest adventure, no doubt accustomed to the dangers presented by the creatures.

Regardless of the outward insignificance Alexander places on his experience, Kehlmann, in his free interpretation, aptly recounts this incident as almost an act of mercy, equivalent to a blessing of some sort given to him by the jungle as represented through her feline form. The jungle had wanted him to know that she had granted him permission to remain and progress with his work. This message was not lost on Alexander as he halted Bonpland, his French traveling companion, from pursuing the beast with a gun stating, “Der Jaguar habe ihn [mich] gehen lassen”30, and from there on out rapidly and increasingly adapted to the ways of jungle life.

Conforming to such harsh and invading circumstances did not however always sit well with Alexander, as Kehlmann chronicles, and despite his adamancy that he was being realistic in understanding his circumstances, his European sense of decorum and appropriateness could not or would not allow him to admit to certain incidents (such as his encounter with the jaguar). And so, much in the same fashion that Kehlmann fictionalizes Alexander’s historical adventures, the fictional Alexander too rewrites his experiences in such a manner as to cast him in a better light (from his perspective) or decides not including the incident at all (as in the case of the fleas to which he said: “[mich] nehme keiner mehr ernst”31 if they –i.e. European society- ever found out he had had fleas living underneath his toenails). Kehlmann’s witty take on what it means to be German is, in the words of Tom Kindt, author of Die Vermessung der Deutschen: Zur Reflexion deutscher Identität in Romanen Georg Kleins, Daniel Kehlmanns und Uwe Tellkamps, “eine

humoristische Reflexion über die Vielfalt und Fragwürdigkeit von Konstruktionen des Deutschseins. Der Roman nimmt sich etablierte Elemente des Selbst- und Fremdverständnisses der Deutschen vor und macht sie in ihrer Lächerlichkeit durchschaubar.”

And so, Kehlmann’s Alexander, in the spirit of what Kehlmann comically interprets as being “ein Deutscher”, embodies all the stereotypes of German-ness. “Ein Deutscher […] sei jemand, der nie krumm sitzt.” This statement alone hints at the German personality traits Kehlmann has lightheartedly and mirthfully imbued Alexander with: “excessive diligence, obsessive attention to detail, an intensely serious attitude.” Alexander then, determined to retain some semblance of his European/German identity, dresses immaculately every morning, refusing to allow the jungle and the lack of ‘civilized’ society to turn him into a savage. Bonpland, catching on to this oddity of Alexander, often teases Alexander, exclaiming at some point, “Müsse man immer so deutsch sein?” Alexander continuously and vehemently defending his German-ness throughout.

Not even the disastrous outcome of the expedition lead by La Condamine, Bouguer and Godin to measure the equator deterred him from laying down his European/German sense of order in a land most people deemed beyond hope, and for many people was perhaps also even beyond the grace of God. “Den Äquator messen […] eine Linie ziehen, wo nie eine gewesen sei” is what La Condamine and his colleagues had set out to do. “Ob sie sich dort draußen umgesehen

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hätten,” Alexander was asked. “Linien gebe es woanders. Nicht hier!” Alexander refused to give up so easily, not even in a place where the insects never died and where the endless twisting and turning of the rivers drove people to insanity. The river in particular, as Alexander had already experienced, was a force to be reckoned with, as if a supernatural creature with it’s own will and inherent desires, it’s powerful current the driving force as well as the life source of the Jungle, it’s soul. On the river, one came face to face with „jene winzigen Verschiebungen in der Wirklichkeit, wenn die Welt für Momente einen Schritt ins Irreale gemacht habe. Dann hätten zwar die Bäume noch wie Bäume, die träge strudelnden Wasser wie Wasser ausgesehen, aber man habe es schaudernd als Mimikri von etwas Fremdem erkannt.” La Condamine and his colleagues along with Lope de Aguirre centuries before them all succumbed to the chaos of the Amazonian jungle. Before arriving they had been sane. Nonetheless, „Linien gebe es überall“, Alexander insisted. „Die Natur sei ein Ganzes.”

Shortly thereafter upon discovering the legendary canal that linked the Amazon and Orinoco rivers, Alexander reaffirms his German-ness by measuring and re-measuring the longitudes and latitudes to perfection, “nichts sei zuverlässig”, determined to bring the canal out of the darkness of uncertainty and doubt of its existence and into the light of the known world. “Man müsse selbst so genau sein, dass einem die Unordnung nichts anhaben könne.” Despite the utter lack of order and logic in the jungle, Alexander never releases hold on the idea of empirical orderliness and in so doing Kehlmann not only depicts Alexander as an archetype for German national identity, but gradually establishes Alexander as a man very much reliant on

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that which is observable and comprehensible; knowledge and understanding coming solely from the collecting of data.

Despite his apparent stubbornness, the strange dreams he dreamt (dreams which at times he knew not if they were his own or those belonging to the “primeval forest” herself), along with his encounters with the natives, his escape from the jaguar, the fulfillment of his childhood dream of crossing the magnetic equator and thus measuring it, his success in finding the channel that connected both main rivers of the Amazon (the same river that mad Aguirre had stumbled upon centuries earlier), his attachment to the flea-ridden dog he adopted along the way (and subsequent loss of the dog months later), and his refutation of the theory of Neptunism, all served to instill in him a sense of who he was and what he wanted his life’s purpose to hold. With each passing incident, his recurrently influx-identity, personality and behavioral quirks all come forth, breaking free and converging within him, solidifying in himself an ever clearer definition of himself as a man of science.

His first major epiphany along his route to self-discovery however did not occur until the evening of a massive downpour. The jungle up until now had stayed her hand and had allowed him to grow accustomed more or less to the constant misery and inexactitude. Yet as day after day had gone by seemingly blending one into the other, evaporating into the pervasive heat, Alexander found himself one evening, along with his companion Aimé Bonpland, stranded in the middle of a torrential thunderstorm. Beneath the mercilessness of the jungle as she „hatte nicht bloß Fluss, Wald, und Himmeln, […] durcheinandergebracht“ but also it seemed time itself, washing away any coherency, the minutes blending into the hours and perhaps even days, Alexander demonstrates his first signs of questioning who he is and what he has been doing with

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his life. He relates to Bonpland: „Manchmal, sagte er, wundere es ihn. Von Rechts wegen hätte er Bergwerke inspizieren sollen. Hätte ein deutsches Schloss bewohnt, […] Und nun sitzt er hier, bei Sintflut, unter fremden Sternen, ein Boot erwartend, das nicht kommen werde.“ When Bonpland then inquired as to whether he thought he had made a mistake, Alexander simply replied that the thought had never occurred to him, not for a second.

This brief conversation, this moment of reflection, which must be noted as purely fictional being that Alexander in his own records mentions no such conversation or epiphany, reveals how his exposure to the foreign elements around him, to the jungle’s grip, had grasped Alexander in their stronghold, solidifying and yet also challenging his perception of himself as an European explorer, as a collector of measurements that would, he hoped, benefit towards a greater scientific good. In a moment of epiphany, he realizes that he is breaking away from the pre-determined mold of the aristocratic-bourgeois life he would have been expected to lead with a family to raise and a government career. For Alexander, his journey into the unchartered regions of the Amazon was more than just a scientific expedition, more than just scientific measurement and the collecting of data. For Alexander, his journey through the jungles of South America played a crucial role in affording him the chance and the opportunity to enhance his predispositions and innate qualities through avid and dedicated exercise and occupation of that which inspired and moved him: the study of nature. The jungle was not only challenging him physically but also challenging his own ideas and notions of the unity and composition of the self, a unity essential to one’s identity. His definition of himself thus begins to take shape, and Alexander demonstrates real progress upon his subconscious endeavor of self-construction.

When towards the end of his stay in South America, Alexander visits the city of New Spain, he takes advantage to stop, observe and measure the ancient Aztec capital. He marvels at the intelligence of the planning of the city, how the Aztecs set up the temples to function as a map of the days, a calendar. Yet he is decidedly put off by the atrocities he is told were committed at the very steps of those impressive temples, namely that as many as twenty-thousand victims or more were sacrificed daily to appease the priests’ requests on behalf of the gods. „So viel Zivilisation und so viel Grausamkeit. Was für eine Paarung! Gleichsam der Gegensatz zu allem, wofür Deutschland stehe.”

Paralleling the great Aztec Nation with that of Germany, Kehlmann explores the notion of national identity and how people as individuals come to define themselves based on their nationality. Kehlmann, throughout the novel and in particular regards to the chapters concerning Alexander’s explorations of the Amazon, addresses the issues concerning the distinctive characteristics of the Germans. These passages and chapters serve to “ein Panorama stereotype Vorstellung deutscher Eigenheiten aufzuspannen und diese über die Kontrastierung mit konkurrierenden Auffassungen oder situativen Gegebenheiten als überzogen oder in anderer Weise unangemessen vorzuführen.”

In so doing, Kehlmann definitively marks Alexander as truly being German, as being born of a nation that places great emphasis on exactitude and orderliness. He is no longer simply a Prussian sailing along the rivers of the Amazon in uniform in order to figuratively bear the essence of his nationhood, he also feels what it means to be German, recognizing what he perceives as the foundation of his home country: a society based not on cruelty and inhumanity but on science and progress. Relying on a comparison of his old memories with those of his new

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experiences and the new information he had been exposed to and had acquired along the way, Alexander takes on a new perspective of himself, becoming aware of his past and how his experiences in the jungle were instrumental in attuning him to his uniqueness in being European, in being German. “In der Konfrontation mit dem Fremden und im Kontrast mit seinem französischen Reisebegleiter Aimé Bonpland erweist sich Humboldt geradezu als Musterdeutscher im Sinne völkerpsychologischer Theorien des 18., 19. Und 20. Jahrhunderts: Er steht für Pünktlichkeitsfetischismus und Genauigkeitsfuroren, Selbstdisziplin und Gefühlskontrolle, Vermessungskult und Empathiemangel, Ideenfixierung und Realitätsverleugnung.”

The grand and yet sinister nature of the ancient civilization of the Aztecs brings about realizations and a myriad of questions that challenge his thinking and understanding of his own European and German connections. Rendered almost insignificant at the steps of the ancient Aztec monuments, he understands himself as an individual more so now than when he embarked on his scientific journey. His relations with the mystical and mysterious world of the Amazonian jungle provided the ideal circumstances in which to reflect on his own idea of himself, undergoing a process of reevaluation of his personhood and in end effect, shaping and reshaping and expanding and solidifying his identity.

Alexander’s gentle and steady musings continued to follow him along his journey through the jungle and down the Orinoco and the hundreds of other tributaries and streams. As he held steady to his navigational enquiries and findings, his growing personal connection to the jungle, as well as his increasing respect towards her with each uncovered secret, slowly began to awaken him to a deeper, more emotional understanding of the jungle, and consequently to his

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own identity. To this effect, Kehlmann explores another moment in Alexander’s scientific journey, which seems to have struck a deep chord in Alexander for the duration of his (fictional) life, as seen decades later in a conversation with his elder brother Wilhelm upon the deathbed of his sister-in-law. As they discuss the concept of destiny, Alexander opinionates, „Niemand habe eine Bestimmung. Man entschließe sich nur, eine vorzutäuschen, bis man es irgendwann selbst glaube.“47 This notion possibly stems back to the soothsayer incident in which a palm reading revealed absolutely nothing. „Da sei nichts. Keine Vergangenheit, keine Gegenwart oder Zukunft. Da sei gewissermaßen keiner zu sehen. Niemand!“48 The soothsayer could read nothing from his palm that would indicate anything about his past, of his present, or regarding his future. If one pauses to consider the impacts of such a fortune-telling from an identity perspective, and despite Alexander’s desire to pass it off as something of no importance, one realizes that Alexander was in fact not entirely unaffected by the soothsayer’s words as he attempts to make one believe he is.

As he stared at his hand, avidly declaring that he did not believe in such nonsense, the echoing words of the soothsayer nonetheless provoke him into contemplating his person and his mission in life. In an effort to understand why he seemed to be such a conundrum, he concludes that destinies are fictitious, playing no role in who he considered himself to be or how he saw his future playing out. Such thinking is reminiscent not only of Thomas Szasz’ thoughts on how one does not stumble upon one’s “predetermined” identity (as the natives would think), but more importantly on Wilhelm von Humboldt’s theories on how one is instead essentially the creator of one’s own identity. Alexander seems to have taken this perplexing incident with the soothsayer as his chance to further solidify, create and perceive himself as he saw fit, as the scientist he had

set out to become. As his brother once stated: “Was also der Mensch notwendig braucht, ist bloß
ein Gegenstand, der die Wechselwirkung seiner Empfänglichkeit mit seiner Selbsttätigkeit
möglich mache.”

With this brief yet deeply powerful exchange, Kehlmann investigates the interplay
between Alexander’s social situation and his psyche. That is to say, Kehlmann explores how
Alexander’s interactions with the natives as well as with the jungle work together with his inner
“Kräfte” to stabilize and affirm Alexander’s sense of individuality, his sense of self. Alexander
cannot see himself as anything but the researcher he has been making himself out to be and the
jungle provides him the necessary environment to apply his abilities to shape himself into just
such a researcher. His decision to travel to South America was the making of him, his escape
from the suffocating society of Europe guaranteeing the successful life he eventually led, and in
this particular incident, Kehlmann’s Alexander, for a moment, stops to speculate his own self-
formation, in end effect realizing and affirming that he himself was in charge of his destiny and
by association his very identity. At the end of his fictional biography, Alexander acquires and
secures “[die] Einsicht, dass es sich bei Konzepten wie etwa dem des Deutschen um
Konstruktionen handelt, hinter denen sich keine wie auch immer geartete Esszenen verbergen.
[…], und Humboldt beschreibt am Beispiel seiner selbst die dezisionistische Konstruktion und
autosuggestive Inszenierung des deutschen Wesens”.

His foray into the jungle did not leave him unscathed. His scientific undertaking allowed
not only for the scientific research he had planned, but also for a gentle and subtle construction
of himself into a renowned researcher and explorer as well as into a more decided and confident

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50 Tom, Kindt. Die Vermessung Der Deutschen: Zur Reflexion Deutscher Identität In Romanen
Georg Kleins, Daniel Kehlmanns Und Uwe Tellkamps. (Zeitschrift Für Germanistik 2012) 370.
individual. The four years of his travels and scientific research brought with it not only numerous breakthroughs in dozens of fields of science, it also brought with it a breakthrough in his identity. He had embarked upon his journey armed only with his natural dispositions and his determination and commitment to his goal of establishing himself as a leader in his field, and as an enthusiastic novice unaware of the exact impact his journey would have, he returned to Europe a man confident in himself, in his identity as a ‘German’ and yet also as a man who broke through the restraints that had bound him to recreate himself as a researcher and explorer of the same caliber or greater as the many that had come before him. “This view of a living nature where man is nothing is both odd and sad. Here, in a fertile land, in an eternal greenness, you search in vain for traces of man; you feel you are carried into a different world from the one you were born into.”

The isolation he found himself in, the observations he made regarding the deeper workings of the native populations, in connection to the plant and animal life and concerning the ecosystem in general led him to observe and reflect upon his person as well. His communion with nature had awoken in him his perceptive faculties, which in turn exercised a great deal of influence on his own person. Through personal participation, Alexander had taken on the challenge of trying to rationally understand the universe (in this case specifically the jungle), so as to gain his own sense of orientation within the greater cosmic proportions. In so doing, he paved the way for modern sciences and showed how one could truly understand oneself if one understood nature, the sacred and primary force of the universe. In being confronted with the wholly foreign and strange surroundings he found himself in, Alexander was forced to rely on his inner self, his daimon (the one familiar and comforting constant along his hard journey) to

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steady him, as a result strengthening and solidifying his own unique identity as a legendary German researcher and explorer.
STRUGGLES OF IDENTITY IN WERNER HERZOG’S FILMS

“The starting point for many of my films is a landscape. Whether it be a real place or an imaginary or hallucinatory one from a dream, and when I write a script I often describe landscapes that I have never seen. I know that somewhere they do exist and I have never failed to find them.”

With an acclaimed reputation and substantial notoriety derived, according to Ronald Dolkhart, “from his evident obsessions, powerful themes, and historical sensitivity,”

the German director Werner Herzog speaks of his uncanny attraction to the most challenging of landscapes and his use of them in his films. Eric Ames in his article Herzog, Landscape, and Documentary describes landscape as something that “can neither be ‘found’ nor ‘discovered,’ as if it simply existed in the phenomenal world. On the contrary, it is created by cultural modes of perception, shaped and reshaped by distinct practices of representation, and surrounded by historical discourse.”

For Herzog, landscape is not simply what we see. A landscape, whether it be a desert, a forest or a mountain range, represents an inner landscape. It is a reflection of the human soul and as such expresses the inner state of mind of humans. Through his films, Herzog chronicles the hidden desires, fears and passions of man. “In my films landscapes are never just picturesque or scenic backdrops as they often are in Hollywood films. [...] The jungle is really all about our dreams, our deepest emotions, our nightmares. It is not just a location, it is a state of mind. It has almost human qualities. It is a vital part of the characters’ inner landscapes.”

53 Ronald H. Dolkart. Civilizations Aria: Film as Lore and Opera as Metaphor in Werner Herzog’s "Fitzcarraldo" (Journal of Latin American Lore, 1985) 126.
landscape is not merely a physical geographical location in his films but rather an integral element that even at times overpowers the actual narrative.

In regards to his Amazonian films, this notion of landscape holds true. In *Aguirre, der Zorn Gottes*, Herzog retells the mad drive of Lope de Aguirre, a defector from a 16th century Spanish expedition assigned the task of finding the lost city of El Dorado. One of the central elements of the film is capturing Aguirre’s daring defiance of the Amazonian jungle. In *Fitzcarraldo*, Herzog quasi ‘documents’ the expedition of a man attempting to overcome the heaviness of reality with the ethereal quality of his dreams of bringing opera to the jungle. In so doing he (both the protagonist as well as Herzog) challenges the most basic laws of nature, seemingly defying gravity itself. Both films recount tales in which the protagonist’s heroic vision is blurred by their uniquely neurotic obsessions. They are driven and to varying degrees ruthless in the extremes they are willing to take to succeed in their quests. Above all else, both are deeply, and in the case of Aguirre – disastrously, affected by the jungle.

The lure of Latin America with its vast distances, imposing landscapes and seemingly infinite riches has long captivated the European imagination. In today’s modern age this is no different. From the time of the Conquistadors through to the Age of Enlightenment and onwards, Europeans have journeyed to the Americas in an attempt to discover it’s secrets, attempting to recreate the region into that of their very own image. One region in particular has drawn much European interest: the Amazonian Rainforest. In an attempt to extend control over that which in actuality cannot be controlled, colonial explorers, such as Lope de Aguirre, Alexander von Humboldt and the modern day explorer and adventurer Werner Herzog have often times aestheticized the wild and resistant landscapes as pure and uninhabited whether it be through
writing or, in the case of Herzog, through film. In end effect “the explorer establishes himself as monarch over the virginal territory.”

Alexander von Humboldt attempted to bring order to the jungle through his writings, meticulous records and catalogues, as if numbers on paper could tame the supposed disharmony and cacophony of noise made by the animals, rivers and the constant pitter-patter of rain drops and condensation dripping from the canopied roof of the forest. Werner Herzog resorts to his medium of film to systematically compartmentalize and ‘reshape’ the terrifying nature of the rain forest, focalizing on the intense beauty of the landscapes. Lutz Koepnick speaks of Herzog’s depictions of nature and the jungle in particular as “denot(ing) a text that frustrates all hermeneutic efforts from the outset; with coarse brutality, the chaotic diversity of the rainforest exposes the systematic inappropriateness of Western routines of cognition and ordering. In other words, despite its animistic enactment of desire, the jungle rejects any attempt to be read, mastered, or even represented. As it reduces human beings to insignificant receptacles of what will always escape their grasp, Herzog’s rainforest delineates a unique training ground for sentiments of sublime terror.”

In his films, Herzog’s characters attempt to gain similar positions of dominance over the jungle as he does whilst filming and the plotline of his films follow similar patterns. “An innocent is thrown into the world, unprepared, encounters despair and destruction, fights with the means at his disposal, suffers, rebels, and loses, leaving behind an emptier, more desperate

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56 Brad Prager. Werner Herzog's Hearts Of Darkness: Fitzcarraldo, Scream Of Stone And Beyond. (Quarterly Review Of Film And Video, 2003) 34.
Brad Prager discusses Herzog’s protagonists as “characters obsessed with defying the laws of gravity” and in their own ways are consequently “possessed by the desire to reach heights that they are told cannot be reached.” Such characters who take on almost mythical proportions along the lines of Greek and Roman figures (for example Prometheus, Icarus and Odysseus to name a few) are common hallmarks of Herzog’s films. His characters are almost always endowed with cosmic vision and as regards to Aguirre and Fitzcarraldo, this vision blinds them to their rebellion against an inevitable and catastrophic defeat. Eric Rentschler in his article entitled *The Politics of Vision: Herzog’s Heart of Glass* considers Herzog’s penchant for frequently depicting such classical heroes (or antiheroes in the case of Aguirre) stating: “Herzog celebrate[s] individual subjects in touch with a mysterious realm of the elemental, seeing them through as subservient to a larger destiny over which they have no ultimate control.”

This larger destiny is of course highly influenced by the Amazon jungle for once inside the confines of the jungle their lives are forever entwined with its life force. Koepnick, in reference to Herzog’s colonial heroes Aguirre and Fitzcarraldo, refers to both as “Promethean rebels” who enter the primordial tangle of the Amazon “turning away from a civilization whose urban centers have turned into forests again.” Despite their apparently similar desires to escape the unreality of the worlds they come from, their fates are radically divergent, the differing outcomes due in part to their relationship with the jungle. In Herzog’s Amazonian tales, “the forest represents a move from the ‘real’ world to a land of shifting forms and sliding categories,

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of unknown quantity and magic: a land representing symbiosis between man and natural environment."\(^{62}\) Along this note, Aguirre on the one hand ends up caught in his own ignorance and greed; his only delusional thought being that of conquest and power. Fitzcarraldo, on the other hand, imposes himself far less aggressively on the jungle and the native population, eventually even incorporating himself into one of their myths. In the following sections I will outline and examine the transformations both men go through along their journey down the rivers and through the Amazon, taking a closer look at how the forest guides Fitzcarraldo’s identity formation and Aguirre’s identity deformation.

**A. Werner Herzog and his New World Conquistadors**

1. Lope de Aguirre: “El Loco”

> When I, Aguirre, want the birds to drop dead from the trees, then the birds will drop dead from the trees. I am the Wrath of God. The earth I walk upon sees me and trembles.

> -- Lope de Aguirre

Werner Herzog’s 1972 film *Aguirre, der Zorn Gottes* tells the story of Don Lope de Aguirre, a 16\(^{th}\) century Spanish conquistador, and his desperate march of hopelessness. The film is loosely based on the life of the actual historical figure but retells his rebellion against the Spanish Crown in a highly fictionalized fashion. The Basque Spanish conquistador, born roughly between 1511 and 1516, is most notably known for his expedition down the Amazon river in

search for the legendary lost city of El Dorado. He fought for Spain in South America for 25 years, leaving behind him the reputation of being “so turbulent and bad tempered that no town in Peru could hold him.”⁶³ Ruthless and slightly insane to begin with, Aguirre commits the treacherous act of mutiny and takes command of the expedition, rebelling against Prince Phillip II and declaring himself ruler of the Amazon. With Aguirre’s rebellious revolt in mind and building off the most basic of facts actually known about the infamous defector, Herzog spins his own tale, focusing principally on the relationship between Aguirre and the jungle: “Aguirre dares defy nature to such an extent that this itself became a central element to the way the film was made.”⁶⁴ His account of the quest captures the ludicrous delusions of the expedition as Aguirre goes through an aggressive process of identity deformation, his slow but steady descent into madness front and center. From a begrudged servant to an imposing and power-crazed leader, Aguirre’s identity shifts, the lawlessness of the jungle drawing out his hatred for the Spanish Crown and his own crazed desires for power and fame. The jungle’s mythical qualities and silent power all come together to pry into his mind, setting off the violent disintegration of his identity.

The opening of the film finds the expedition led by Don Gonzalo Pizarro on Christmas Day 1560 descending into the Amazonian Basin down a steep and rocky mountain, engulfed in fog and the eerie sounds of the forest. At first there is nothing to be seen except mountain and trees. Then a glimpse of movement is caught by the camera as it focuses in on a line of men descending the perilously steep slope. The convoy consists of Spanish soldiers, impractically dressed (in full armor) for the environment they traverse, and a large group of enslaved indigenous peoples hauling weapons and food items as well as herding pigs and llamas. As they

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⁶³ As documented by the chronicler Francisco Vásquez in 1562.
descend through the fog and the clouds, there is an ominous feeling as if the single file line of soldiers and the natives were being watched by someone or something, watched by the jungle. The intruders are made insignificant against the immensity and power of the Amazon, running the risk of being devoured by and lost in the inhospitable landscape. Once at the bottom the group is confronted with the raging waters of the river which forces the men to make their way through the entangling foliage of the forest despite the threat of Indians, the ground made wet and muddy from the flooded river. Desperately trying to keep from remaining stagnantly stuck in the mud, the Spaniards push back harder against the harsh conditions of the forest. Moving and yet making almost no progress, the expedition is forced to halt, divide into two smaller groups, one of which will attempt to continue the mission via the river on makeshift rafts. In this latter group is the newly appointed expedition commander Don Pedro de Ursua and the infamous Lope de Aguirre. As they drift along the river, out of place in an environment not suited to European sensibilities, Aguirre gazes up into the mist shrouded trees, listening to the cries of the birds, ominous distrust of the Amazon and its secrets written across his face. The journey downriver is fraught with peril as the river mercilessly throws the rafts to and fro, jostling the men about like toys. Barely managing to make it ashore, the rough rapids pull one of the rafts into a whirlpool, ensnaring and enslaving the Spaniards on board.

It is in this scene that the viewer is made aware of Aguirre’s penchant for cruel and dramatic violence and his outright defiance of authority. Despite being unable to hear the men for the raging of the river, nor reach them safely in an attempt to rescue them from the inevitability of their death, orders are given by Don Ursua to attempt a rescue mission. This does not sit well with Aguirre as he ironically declares the captain mad. Holding no ultimate authority however, he is forced to begrudgingly accept the orders, doing so with a grain of salt as he waits
and plots his moment to seize command of the expedition, a look of disdain contorting his face. As night falls and gunfire is heard, the group discovers the next morning that the men on the raft are dead. Don Pedro de Ursua consults with the priest to plan a proper burial but this decision is not to Aguirre’s liking either, who takes the situation into his own hands, and defying even God himself, denies the men a Christian burial by blasting the raft with a cannon ball. Through his actions, Aguirre solidifies for the viewer his blatant disrespect for authority and his greed for power, always attempting to undermine his leaders with subterfuge. Like the jungle, he too defies those who attempt to rule over him. He also showcases his scrupulousness in dealing with those he deems unworthy and beneath him, which in essence includes everyone, even the Amazon.

In the following scenes Aguirre completes his act of rebellion, finalizing his split with the Spanish Crown by shooting and wounding Don Pedro de Ursua then putting him on trial as traitor. Unwilling to return to the main camp as Ursua had decided, Aguirre turns to the men, ranting about the wealth and riches that await them if they only decided to disobey and make their own course, as Cortés had done when he invaded Mexico. Aguirre, still vehemently defying the jungle in an attempt to escape his inescapable mortality, refuses to turn back and give in and makes the brash decision to continue to battle against the jungle, despite the innumerable setbacks the group has already had due to the impenetrability of the forest and the savageness of the river, an environment the men have already experienced as tirelessly hostile and murderous. From here on out Aguirre attempts rebellion against an inevitable and catastrophic defeat that he has blinded himself to but which the natives recognize and prophesize.65

65 Balthazar, one of the captured natives, upon speaking to Flores (Aguirre’s daughter) about his people refers to the plight of the Spaniards stating, “Es gibt keinen Ausweg aus diesem Urwald.” (“There is no way out of this jungle.”)
Once again slowly drifting downriver, the raft functioning as a makeshift empire on the one hand and a cage on the other (trapped as they are on the raft not only by the cannibalistic tribes that inhabit the shorelines but by the river itself which flows at a sluggish pace to the point that it seems as if they have simply stopped moving at all), Aguirre’s ability to control events and to make history happen dwindles at an alarming pace. This is set in stark contrast to the reality of his forced sluggishness and lack of movement. The river here, no longer rough and raging, has taken control, time now determined by its currents. Jacques de Villiers in his article entitled *Myth, Environment and Ideology in the German Jungle of Aguirre, the Wrath of God,* describes “an unknown force [that] dictates the flow of time, and the human characters are helpless to its passing.”\(^6\) This force, I believe, is the river itself forcing the Spaniards to a halt, rendering them motionless as the jungle that surrounds them is teeming with life and more importantly with indigenous inhabitants who pose a great threat to the Spaniards.

The indigenous inhabitants make occasional appearances, peaking through the dense foliage but remaining distant, almost invisible. A poisonous arrow shot and killing one of the soldiers instigates a manic episode of return fire, the soldiers uselessly attempting to defend themselves from an unseen enemy. Aguirre, attempting to show his dominance over the forest and its inhabitants, aggressively orders the men to return fire, shoving and pushing them as he thrusts weapons into their hands. Firing their guns and cannon, their futile response is hopeless against the cannibalistic silence of the jungle. This retaliation is a clear sign of the power of the jungle and the ‘primitive’ forces that inhabit it against the ‘civilized’ forces of the men onboard the raft. They are no longer in Castile but in the stronghold of nature. They have failed however, to grasp this notion. Uncomfortable now with the lack of noise coming from the jungle, Aguirre

\(^6\) Jacques de Villiers. *Myth, Environment and Ideology in the German Jungle of Aguirre, the Wrath of God* (Sense of Cinema 63, 2012)
orders one of the natives to play his flute to fill the silence. He is uncomfortable because the stillness reflects the standstill of his mission and the lack of control he has over the situation. By creating sound, he naively assures himself of a reality existing only in his mind, a reality in which he holds the world in the palm of his hand. Constantly living in a state of intense struggle with the world around him, Aguirre is slowly transfixed, his humanity ebbing away like a river erodes a rocky mountainside.

As the group passes the days idly, merely going through the motions, Aguirre is engulfed in a state of steady musings. An encounter with two of the natives who have rowed up to the raft has almost no effect on him, as he remains silent throughout the short interrogation before one of the Indians is killed. Similarly as he is confined to the boundaries of the raft due to the lack of success in finding solid ground to land on, so to is his mind confined to his delusions of grandeur. This confinement, forced upon him by the very forces he believes himself to be mastering, reflect Aguirre’s spiraling downfall, his psychotic beliefs pulling him into a vicious cycle of madness.

The extent of Aguirre’s identity disintegration finally comes to light when the men encounter a tribe of Indians living along the banks of the river. As the cannibalistic natives shout that there is meat floating by, the Spaniards make ready to attack, rowing to shore and stampeding the Indians into the forest. As the natives flee, the Spaniards set fire to the village, ransacking it whilst keeping the natives at bay. In the aftermath of the short-lived skirmish, the men gathered in the now deserted village of the cannibals, Aguirre delivers his most defiant of speeches, claiming his rights over the Amazon and creation itself. As he grasps a charred tree trunk he declares, “When I, Aguirre, want the birds to drop dead from the trees, then the birds will drop dead from the trees. I am the Wrath of God. The earth I walk upon sees me and
trembles.” The irony of his rebellion lies in the fact that his declaration is made not only to a handful of emaciated and terrified soldiers but also more importantly to nature who remains unperturbed, mocking him. As he manically declares that the ground trembles at his feet and the animals drop dead at the sight of him, jungle life continues as usual with the birds chirping and singing, almost in an attempt to remind Aguirre that he is under the power of nature and not inversely. His stance, leaning against the burned tree trunk, the jungle lurking at his back, ever present and hostile, belies the power he truly has, which at this point is nonexistent. As Gregory Waller explains in his article “Aguirre: the Wrath of God”: History, Theater and the Camera, Aguirre’s “desire is not merely to control the present and rule the raft, but to create the future and govern the world by the force of his will and imagination.”67 What he fails to comprehend is how the jungle works its powers of sabotage through such means as imagination, hallucination and illusion, for the jungle itself is composed of these ingredients. Aptly put by Dana Bellini, “The jungle ultimately cannibalizes life: Aguirre and his men learn that they have been reduced to mere “meat” in this world.”68

The long days of sailing downriver have robbed him of his sanity, the heat of the sun and the lack of sufficient provisions taking their toll on his mind, if not his body. Just as he has intruded on nature, so to has nature finally begun to show its effects on Aguirre, intruding on his delusions. Reality now has taken complete control of the expedition and the men on board, in particular Aguirre, whose identity was already questionable to begin with. It has pervaded his mind, his identity struggling to remain afloat as he drifts further and further into a state of imagined power, the false impression of conquered paradise initiating and propagating his

blunderous fall into self-deception and hallucination. The roles have now been completely reversed, nature no longer the victim (as previously perceived by Aguirre). Instead, Aguirre has become victim to the forces within the jungle, falling prey and succumbing to its mystical powers of deception and misguidance.

In the last scenes of the film, the raft continuously drifts into the trees hanging over the river and the men continue to drop dead from arrows shot by an invisible enemy. As moral continues to dwindle and hunger and fear have instilled themselves in the men, Aguirre continues to hold strong to his fantasy of conquering El Dorado. Not even a plea from Father Carvajal sways him, as he is too caught up in the trickery of the jungle, no longer able to distinguish reality from illusion. “The conquest of Mexico was no illusion,” he states, refusing to fail, unwilling to relinquish his perceived conquest of the Amazon to the next group of colonialists sure to succeed where he has failed. “These men measure riches in gold. It’s more. It’s power and fame. I despise them for it.”

Since descending the cloud enshrouded mountains into the jungle, the lines between reality and illusion have gradually faded to the point that even the stability of land and the fluidity of the river have begun to blend together. In a land in which, according to the native populations, it seems as if God indeed has not finished His creation, the forest seems to grow straight from the water, eliminating any resemblance to a shoreline and in essence bringing into question the very notion of sanity. In the end, not only does the murky river continue to stagnate, but the air as well carries with it a heaviiness that weighs down on the raft. Beset with fever, the few men left on the raft sluggishly drift downriver towards an inescapable fate.

In his last monologue, the viewer follows Aguirre as he mindlessly circles the raft, most if not all the men dead from fever or poisoned arrows. Just as the raft is overcome by small
monkeys, so to is Aguirre’s identity similarly overcome by the jungle landscape. With his last outburst of defiance, no longer comprehending the reality of events, he proclaims: “I, the Wrath of God, will marry my own daughter, and with her found the purest dynasty ever known to man. Together we will rule the whole of this continent. I am the Wrath of God. Who else is with me?” Grabbing one of the squirming monkeys he attempts to solidify and confirm his delusionary dreams stating, “We will endure. I am the Wrath of God.” As the sun’s brilliant rays shine blindingly down on him and the unfinished creation of God, the digressed state of Aguirre’s identity is shown clearly in its ineffectiveness and futileness. His identity, in essence he himself, has become “incapable of generating life and shaping the world to his vision.” The circular motion of the camera in this scene helps emphasize the deranged state of Aguirre’s identity. It no longer is able to hold still and focus completely on one particular spot. It is no longer progressing but has completely digressed to the point that his thoughts and actions continually and perpetually revert back on each other. Each spin of the camera reflects back the obsessive circling of Aguirre’s expedition and more importantly his spiraling downfall of his identity. Like them, the camera moves but gets nowhere. His state of being, his identity has come to a stationary standstill affirming the power of his obsessions and the power of the jungle over him.

2. Fitzcarraldo: “Conquistador of the Useless”

I have but one dream, the Opera: the Great Opera in the Jungle. I am going to build it, and Caruso will inaugurate it.

-- Brian Sweeney Fitzgerald (“Fitzcarraldo”)

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Approximately three hundred years after the cunningly cruel figure of Lope de Aguirre finally descended into madness, ceding to the impenetrability of the tropical rain forest, another quasi-mythical figure appears on the map, a one Carlos (Jose) Fermin Fitzcarrald. A well-known merchant and rubber baron in Peru during the late 1880s, Jose Fitzcarrald had established a reputation for being driven, adventurous, persistent in his endeavors and at times monomaniacal as well as evil, particularly in regards to the indigenous populations. He is remembered, not only for his support of Peruvian sovereignty but also for one incredible feat; namely that of disassembling a ship, transferring it in pieces over a cliff measuring 1,500 feet in height and reassembling the ship in the neighboring river system known to be plentiful in rubber trees in order to exploit the natural resources of the area. As did Aguirre, Jose Fitzcarrald faded away into legend because of his struggles against the jungle, “factors he tried to dominate with European rapaciousness and cruelty.”

Having stumbled upon the story of the life of this infamous Jose Fitzcarrald, Herzog is once again drawn to the primeval Amazon, setting his 1982 film “Fitzcarraldo” in the heart of the jungle and using the true story of Jose Fitzcarrald’s legendary feat as a point of departure. Taking only the very basic idea of transporting a ship over a mountain, Herzog recreates his protagonist as an aspiring and rather crazed Irishman living in Iquitos, a small provincial town in the Peruvian Amazon, during the time of the great rubber boom and the dwindling clamor for opera. His name: Brain Sweeney Fitzgerald, or as everyone calls him “Fitzcarraldo.” Whilst Aguirre had been driven by greed and a desire to conquer, Fitzcarraldo’s ‘El Dorado’ is represented and incarnated in Caruso and opera. Obsessed with opera, he takes it upon himself to

70 Ronald H. Dolkart. Civilizations Aria: Film as Lore and Opera as Metaphor in Werner Herzog's "Fitzcarraldo" (Journal of Latin American Lore, 1985) 129.
71 Ronald H. Dolkart. Civilizations Aria: Film as Lore and Opera as Metaphor in Werner Herzog's "Fitzcarraldo" (Journal of Latin American Lore, 1985) 129.
embark on an adventure that will, if successful, enable him to bring the grandeur of the opera to Iquitos. The jungle however, seemingly unchanged from the time of Aguirre (the trees, the natives, the river and the heavy atmosphere are all as the conquistadors left them) has other plans and continues to assert its power over those who attempt to intrude on it. In stark contrast to Aguirre’s disorderly expedition, Fitzcarraldo maps his way through the jungle, aware of potential difficulties and possible dangers. Despite this, his plans slowly disintegrate, the river systems and rapids, the mountainous regions covered in dense forest and the native populations all becoming obstacles in the attainment of his goal.

In the opening scenes, images of the jungle permeate the screen: a vast sea of trees, mist rising from the canopy, creates an eerie effect yet the forest is strikingly both pristine and serene. The Amazon shows itself as something unconquerable, untamable, and uniquely foreign and exotic. The opening lines inform the viewer: “Cayahuari Yacu nennen die Waldindianer dieses Land, das Land in dem Gott mit der Schöpfung nicht fertig wurde. Erst nach dem Verschwinden der Menschen, glauben sie, werde er wiederkehren, um sein Werk zu vollenden.” Even the natives fear her ferocity, her mystery. The Amazon, steadfast and unchanging, is a land of insubstantiality for it is a „dreamland“ as Fitzcarraldo describes it. It is located in the physical realm and yet it remains unconnected to reality, afloat in a sea of dreams, a landscape left unfinished by God himself. It is with this vastness that the viewer is greeted; Fitzcarraldo, merely a pinpoint of white in the darkness of the night as he paddles with passionate resilience and ferocious determination down the river to arrive at the Teatro Amazonas, the opera house in Manuas, for the sole purpose of witnessing a performance of Caruso for the first and likely last time in his life. In these first scenes we catch a glimpse of the man that is Fitzcarraldo. We get to

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know and understand his aspirations, his true calling and the failures that he has had along the path towards fulfilling his one dream. He is a man with a deep love of music and in particular of opera, full of fever dreams, larger than life and highly imaginative. He is a man consumed with the desire to ‘hear’ life versus actually living it. One could almost describe him as a megalomaniac in his unyielding delusions of power and self-importance.

Upon finally reaching the opera house, Fitzcarraldo, dragging his lady companion behind him, arrives breathless at the entrance, the dramatic voices of the opera singers wafting in the air, taunting him as he is refused admittance. He is not dissuaded however and pleadingly recounts his plight to the man at the door. His pilgrimage from Iquitos to Manaus, a 1200-mile journey downriver, was both arduous and lengthy, his bloody hands from having to row for two days and two nights due to a broken motor a testament to his inextinguishable yearning for opera. He makes it into the theater for the final moments of Verdi’s *Ernani* and as the protagonist of the opera, the beloved Caruso, tragically takes his own life beseeching the crowd with outstretched hand and tragic gaze, a transfixed Fitzcarraldo believes in his heart that Caruso’s piercing gaze, his very performance, is directed at him alone. As he absorbs Caruso’s final moments of onstage agony, he finds himself “descending into the operatic world thrown out to him.” In other words, his obsession takes on a final burst of invigoration and is imbued with new life and grander proportions. He sees no impediment to his urgent need of bringing Caruso to his part of the jungle.

Having returned to Iquitos, to his audience of local children who flock to him when they fancy a concert, fascinated with the imposing voice of Caruso that spills out of his gramophone, Fitzcarraldo begins anew his quest to build the greatest opera house the jungle has yet to see.

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Manic in his need to build the opera house, he locks himself in the church and begins shouting from the bell tower, ringing the bell incessantly whilst proclaiming to keep the church closed until he had his opera house. Up until now, as the viewer has recently discovered, his attempts at raising funds to build this great opera house in the jungle have consisted of mediocre undertakings including an embarrassing failed endeavor at constructing a railway to traverse the jungle and an obviously unsustainable ice producing business. Armed with the imagined mission given to him by Caruso himself, Fitzcarraldo begins plotting his next great scheme, this time through the exploitation of the rubber trees in the Ucayali region of Peru. He begins by contacting one of the local rubber barons, a certain Don Aquilino. It is during one of these meetings that he receives an epiphany: to haul a steamship over the cliff situated at a strategic point between two rivers, the ridge being the closest point between the tributaries, in order to occupy an area of heretofore inaccessible and unexploited rubber trees. And so begins his journey of identity formation from entranced dreamer to obsessed businessman challenging the jungle in its own domain and finally solidifying into conquistador of the useless.

Fitzcarraldo, a man of simplicity and culture is drawn not to the world of mere mortals but to an apparent world beyond the reach of ordinary man: the world inhabited by opera. Through his interactions with the local rubber barons, whom he at one point endeavored to persuade (to no avail) to raise the funds necessary to build an opera house of magnanimous proportions, the viewer perceives him as being a man of big dreams. He is so beguiled by and obsessed with his operatic aspirations that he lives and breathes for nothing else. After having been grossly mistreated and mocked by the over-feed and self-important rubber barons, ladies and gentlemen belonging to the crème de la crème of jungle society and as such supposedly cultured and refined in their tastes, Fitzcarraldo espouses with great conviction and a feverish
look in his eye: “The reality of your world is nothing more than a rotten caricature of great opera.” It is this Fitzcarraldo, half crazed and slightly delusional but harmless and righteous in his desires and who takes his dream into his own hands and sets out to accomplish what no one has yet and likely ever will accomplish.

For Fitzcarraldo, the jungle represents a land waiting to be cultured, waiting for the voice of Caruso. It is not simply in the economic return as such that he is interested in. Whatever money he may make from exploiting the jungle represents for him the aesthetic education he wishes to bring to the jungle and the natives. This economic exploitation is carried out not in greed for money and for attaining riches and power. It is, at its core, carried out in the name of opera. For the rubber barons on the other hand, the jungle represents a land to be exploited for mere economic gain, no matter the cost to human or natural life. They embody the hypocrisy and lack of culture that Fitzcarraldo seeks to avoid at all costs. In stark contrast to his purer motivations, those of the barons exceed no further than their pockets. As a white foreigner, Fitzcarraldo brings with him a love for culture and opera. To achieve his goal, however, he must embrace the notion of western exploitation that the barons represent and so readily adhere to. His passion for opera is such though that he will let nothing stand in his way. He is resolute in his undertaking and rebellious in his stance against the forces that stand before him.

The outset of his expedition to claim a piece of territory on the Ucayali River is one of great hope. With everything in place, his steamship repaired and christened the Molly Aida in honor of his ‘wife’, a crew of men to assist him (some more worthy than others), and his precious gramophone on board so that Caruso may accompany him as witness to his impressive undertaking, Fitzcarraldo sets course towards the Pachitaea, the parallel tributary to the Ucayali. Before sailing down into hostile Indian territory, Fitzcarraldo and his crew stop at the last
outpost. It is the small settlement of Saramariza, run by Catholic priests who school the younger children of the local tribes in the ways of western man. During a discussion of teaching patriotism to the older members of the tribe, the head priest remarks: “We can’t seem to cure them of the idea that our everyday life is only an illusion behind which lies the reality of dreams.” To this Fitzcarraldo, gazing fixedly at the priest, passionately and excitedly states: “Actually I am very interested in these ideas. I specialize in opera myself.”

With this one remark the viewer registers Fitzcarraldo’s comparison of the pure, mythical and spiritual belief system of the Indians, individuals who have lived in close spiritual contact with the rainforest for centuries, to his own decadent form of culture and art: opera. In so doing, Fitzcarraldo, unlike Aguirre who never at any point aligned himself with the Amazon or the natives, creates an imaginary link between his world of opera and that of the dream world of the natives. In a somewhat twisted fashion he demonstrates a deeper understanding of the native populations and the jungle due entirely to his own obsession with opera. With this insight, Fitzcarraldo’s brief interlude with the Spanish missionaries signals the direction his acclimatization to the jungle will take.

All is smooth sailing until about halfway up the Pachitaea, when the crew steams into territory infamous for the head hunting Jivaro tribe. As hell breaks loose on board, the crew clamoring with fear whilst arming themselves for attack, a steady beat of drums slowly pierces the otherwise still air, gradually increasing in volume. With the Indians remaining unseen in the thick tangle of the trees, their presence is felt everywhere and as such their danger is immeasurably increased. Their cries punctuate the rhythmic beating of the drums instilling fear in the hearts of the men on board the Molly Aida. Fear in the hearts that is, of everyone but

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Fitzcarraldo. In this scene he faces his first battle against the jungle and its native inhabitants and stands tall and strong, imposing himself as a colonialist would, claiming rights upon a landscape he has no right over. Unfazed by the warning signs or the ominous war chants, Fitzcarraldo turns to Caruso in an effort to fight back. “Now it’s Caruso’s turn,” he says, setting up the gramophone on the roof of the steamship. As Caruso’s voice spills over, penetrating it seems the deepest corners of the jungle, the opera imbues Fitzcarraldo with a false sense of power and confidence as he takes the stance of victor placing his hands on his hips whilst gazing out across the river.

As the opera music makes it’s way through the jungle, the beating drums and chanting from the Indians slowly dies down until they desist all together. In this scene the viewer is confronted with a man firmly entrenched in his convictions and determined to see the expedition through. He has witnessed the dangers that lie around him and despite this knowledge he persists, his dream far more a reality than the reality actually surrounding him. Enraptured by his goal he is strangely calm; naively assured of his safety and of the power of his music against the Amazon. For the moment it appears as if Fitzcarraldo has won, taming the jungle and the natives. As the scene progresses and night falls, contact has still not been made. Huerequeque, the hired cook and self-appointed expert on the Jivaros gives an account of the history of the tribe to Fitzcarraldo and tells him of how the Indians have been “looking for a white god in a sacred boat and [that] at the end of their pilgrimage the white god would show them a land without sorrow, without death, where people stay young forever.”

Here Fitzcarraldo makes the strategic decision to take advantage of this myth, using the superstitions and beliefs of the natives to advance his business ambitions. It is at this point that Fitzcarraldo makes the switch from dreamer to obsessed businessman. He has perceived the natives as a threat to his moneymaking scheme and consequently to his long held dream and as
such has decided to associate himself with one of their oldest myths in order to eliminate the threat they represent. In essence he decides to work with the natives and the jungle rather than against them, acknowledging nature’s agency and the power of the Jivaro tribe (or perhaps more so his weakness in comparison to them). Rather than arm himself with weapons and go on the hunt to kill, a decision that ultimately lead to the failure of a previous expedition, he decides to use peaceable means to subdue the Indians and ensure the continuation of his expedition as well as the success of the entire enterprise: “This god doesn’t come with canons. He comes with the voice of Caruso.” His perception of the mysticism of the religious beliefs and myths of the indigenous Jivaros is of course stunted by the shallowness of his colonial attitude towards them. For despite his more open approach to them, he is unsuccessful in disassociating the negative stereotypes he has acquired simply by being a foreigner.

With the desertion of most his crew the following morning, Fitzcarraldo turns once again to Caruso to firm his resolve but decides to turn back, seeing no way to go forward without the man power of his crew. This is however made impossible by the natives who have decided to block the return route with trees. They too have their own agenda it seems and having denied Fitzcarraldo from his opportunity of escape, they left him no other choice than to continue onwards and forward. He had wanted to give in, admit defeat, but the jungle had other plans for him. Here he enters into a stage of uncertainty, unsure of what the natives have planned and what exactly their interests in the boat and in him are. Doubt comes into play; doubt in regards to what his action should now be, doubt about what is about to happen, doubt about the future success of the expedition he had set such high hopes on. Pensive, worry lines furrowing his brow, he attempts to rationalize the behavior of the Jivaro but comes up short. There does not seem to

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The Dutch captain of the Molly Aida, Orinoco Paul, advises Fitzcarraldo not to fire any weapons as this was the downfall of the last expedition he had participated in.
exist any plausible explanation for why they have gathered in such large numbers, armed with bows and arrows and yet seem to hold their distance. One fact he does comprehend with certainty: that he is now in the hands of the Jivaro. An allegorical cultural conflict then ensues between Fitzcarraldo as the invading white foreigner and the indigenous Jivaro tribe.

His moment of intense reflection does not however come until the Jivaro come aboard the Molly Aida. Knowing not what they want of him or his now three-member crew, Fitzcarraldo, calm and composed on the outside, meets the Indians with a gesture of friendship and respect. Instead of shaking hands however, the Indians begin to caress his hand and touch his hair as they inspect his clothing down to his suit buttons. Fitzcarraldo’s outwardly calm and collected manner belies the worry and consternation he is hiding, his lack of knowledge concerning the natives inducing this stage of self-doubt; doubt in regards his person, his identity. In his misgiving towards the Jivaro, Fitzcarraldo develops the classic symptoms of categorizing the natives in the group of ‘other.’ In so doing, he subconsciously attempts to reinforce his Europeanness and more importantly his ‘superiority’ as a man of culture, in the European sense of the word. However, his doubt brings into play a particular lack of confidence, confidence needed in ascertaining what role the players on the playing field hold; the playing field entailing naturally the jungle, it’s rivers, and the Molly Aida. His musings come forth during dinner, while the crew of the Molly Aida tensely sit and attempt to eat as the natives encircle them; staring at the intruders, brandishing their spears, conversing amongst themselves and playing music. The casualness Fitzcarraldo attempts to display is made apparent by his restless gestures and fidgeting as he looks from one side to the other as if awaiting a sudden ambush. Fitzcarraldo quickly flips the stakes however, transforming what he had originally perceived as a situation within which the
natives held the upper hand into a business opportunity of enormous proportions. Transfixed as he is to his enterprise, what he fails to grasp however is how perversely out of place his intrusion is and that it is not his machinations that turn things around for the better but rather the jungle’s desire to use him to accomplish it’s own hidden agenda that maintains the flow of events.

With the natives in tow, the Molly Aida finally reaches the cliff that will be either the making or breaking of him, he declares, spellbound by the sight of it: “That slope may look insignificant but it is going to be our destiny.” Unwittingly, Fitzcarraldo voices what he has done from the beginning. That is, he has placed his life and the success of his expedition in the hands of the Jungle (and directly in the hands of the Indians) although it has not fully dawned on him yet. His colonial stance persists as he declares that “the bare-asses are going to help us”, as if he were in possession of the power to command them. His obsessiveness here now borders on megalomania, his delusional dreams blinding him to the excessiveness of his project. As he meticulously measures and calculates, the Jivaro Indians begin the work of clearing a wide stretch of land up one side of the mountain and down the other in order to install a system of pullies that will pull the ship up the cliff. Dynamite completes the sacrilegious destruction of the Amazon as Fitzcarraldo’s exercise of power reaches a frenzied climax. Turned into slaves, the natives are now almost property of Fitzcarraldo, unrelenting in his thirst for success. He exploits them in the same manner he has planned to exploit the rubber trees, viewing them as mere objects and the means to an end. Never once did he stop to ponder the situation and attempt to truly understand the reasoning behind their support, not even when Huerequeque announced that the chief had agreed to help. At this point he merely seized the opportunity that had been

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76 Huerequeque loosely translates what they are saying, informing Fitzcarraldo about how the natives know that he is not a god but the boat has impressed them. He also mentions a curse the natives believe has been cast upon the land but Fitzcarraldo pays no attention to this, overlooking it as a possible motive for the actions of the tribe.
graciously given to him without a seconds thought. The singular moment in which he shows any concern is upon the death of two of the natives who had gotten trapped beneath the steamship as it was being pulled up the mountain. It is a tragic scene full of despair as Fitzcarraldo sits on a log and hides his face in his hands. It is unclear however, what exactly he is lamenting, whether he is more so overcome by the impact of the deaths on his project or whether he is sorry for the actual deaths. As work continues and progress is made though, he continues as if nothing had happened.

With the boat safely and successfully pulled over the mountain, Fitzcarraldo celebrates in what he imagines as being a right of passage. Drinking with the natives and having his face painted in the style of the natives impresses upon him the notion that he has not only prevailed against the forces of the jungle but has now united with them, the struggles of his project having brought them closer together. He is however, sorely mistaken, his supposed triumph merely a guise behind which has stood the true reason for the success of his enterprise. The jungle has merely been playing tricks on him, as the captain of the Molly Aida once said: “The jungle plays tricks on your senses. It’s full of lies, demons and illusions.” Unfortunately for Fitzcarraldo, he has not learned to tell the difference between reality and hallucination and the price he pays for allowing himself to be blinded by his opera addiction is allowing himself to be used by the Jivaro tribe to meet not his needs but their own.

In the following scene the mysteriousness and secrecy of the jungle is revealed as the Molly Aida goes crashing down the river through the Pongo des Mortes, a turbulent stretch of the river that had made access to the Ucayali territory impossible from downstream. During the night the Indians had cut the boat loose and as Fitzcarraldo runs up and down the boat in a panic unaware of what has just happened, uselessly trying to reclaim the control he thought he had had,
the jungle shows itself in its true colors. Fitzcarraldo can no longer deny the power of the jungle and like his ship has not come out of the journey unscathed. Traumatized by the event he does not even register the news that Huerequeque brings him of how the ship, in the eyes of the natives, was meant to be sacrificed to appease the evil spirits of the Pongo. He returns to civilization dejected and disappointed, brought down from his dream world to the reality of the jungle.

The violent triumph of nature over his lunatic dream however does not throw him completely off however, his dream perhaps bigger than even the jungle itself. Although the Indians won and Fitzcarraldo loses, in the manner of a dreamer who can never be broken because he lives through his imagination, he manages to transform his defeat into a small victory. He manages a momentary triumph by adapting himself to the jungle and acknowledging its agency. Ever in the pursuit of defying the laws of gravity, he reworks his former plans and in the end does indeed bring the opera to Iquitos, even if for a short spell. As the *Molly Aida* sails towards Iquitos, an opera assemble act out Bellini’s *I Puritani* and Fitzcarraldo stands proud as punch at the top of the ship, smoking a cigar with that same look of conquest on his face as when he first started out. He is no longer the obsessed businessman obscenely challenging the jungle and nor is he the infatuated dreamer. Instead, due to his relationship with the jungle and the immense efforts he underwent during his rebellion, his identity takes on a more worldly and mature stance, acknowledging his limits and yet still retaining a semblance of his former dreamer self. His struggles against the jungle and against the mysticism of the natives forced him to become a man of more flexibility and understanding. In resigning himself to the less than desired outcome of his dreams and surrendering himself to the jungle, an entity beyond his grasp, he contents himself with the knowledge that he did succeed to some extent for he has witnessed the
impossibility with his own eyes and that is proof enough for him.\textsuperscript{77} His character now retains elements of both the reality of his environs as well as the idealism of the dreamer. Unlike Aguirre but much in the same manner as Alexander von Humboldt in Kehlmann’s \textit{Die Vermessung der Welt}, Fitzcarraldo manages to attain a certain deeper understanding of the jungle and in end effect manages to concretize a more stabile identity because of his more or less successful interactions with the jungle and its agencies.

**B. Werner Herzog and the Amazon**

“I should say that the landscapes are not so much the impetus for the film, rather they become the film’s soul, and sometimes the characters and the story come afterwards, always very naturally.”\textsuperscript{78} – Werner Herzog

The German-born film director, Werner Herzog, upon commenting about his reasons for making films states: “It’s not only my dreams. My belief is that all these dreams are yours as well. And the only distinction between me and you is that I can articulate them. I make films because I have not learned anything else and I know I can do it to a certain degree. And it is my duty, because this might be the inner chronicle of what we are and we have to articulate ourselves otherwise we would be cows in the field.”\textsuperscript{79} In much the same fashion as Wilhelm von Humboldt, this desire of Herzog to articulate and make visible that which most often remains hidden, in essence the inner emotions and workings of man, is what has led him to film making.

\textsuperscript{77} Fitzcarraldo compares himself to the man who discovered the Niagara Falls. When asked for proof of what he was describing he merely said: “For I have seen it.”

\textsuperscript{78} Paul Cronin. \textit{Herzog on Herzog}. (London: Faber & Faber, 2002) 83.

\textsuperscript{79} Les Blank. \textit{Burden of Dreams}. (Criterion Collection, 2011)
and not just any filmmaking. Because of the strong desire to express the inexpressible and to communicate the things that are often overlooked, his style of filmmaking tends to lean towards producing films that are highly physical and demanding in their making. As he puts it, “It is an athletic endeavor, like life itself.”

“Very few people seek these images today which correspond to the time we live, pictures that can make you understand yourself, your position today, our status of civilization. I am one of the ones who try to find those images.” These images Herzog speaks of are the numerous landscapes that star in his films: jungles, mountains, deserts and islands are a few of his preferred inhospitable landscapes. His attachment to the physical world is without a doubt and the Amazon in particular has drawn Herzog to its domain several times, as can be seen by the number of films he has produced there. Just as Caspar David Friedrich, the 19th-century German Romantic landscape painter with whom Herzog often identifies himself with, “never wanted to paint landscapes per se, but wanted to explore and show inner landscapes,” so too does Herzog want to show inner landscapes, using not the medium of paint but film. He states, “For me, a true landscape is not just a representation of a desert or a forest. It shows an inner state of mind, literally landscapes, and it is the human soul that is visible through the landscapes presented in my films, […]”

As the films attempt to reflect this inner truth of humanity, his landscapes

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80 Gideon Bachmann. The Man on the Volcano: A Portrait of Werner Herzog. (Film Quarterly, 1977) 7.
emerge as “existential motif(s) for mortality that contrasts the ephemerality of human life with
the indifference and infinitude of nature.”

These existential landscapes naturally do not leave Herzog untouched. In Les Blank’s
*Burden of Dreams*, filmed between 1979 and 1981 as a documentary on the making of
*Fitzcarraldo*, Herzog describes how he perceives the jungle, leaving the impression that much in
the same way that his characters are affected and their identities are reshaped, so to does he go
through a process of formation, each encounter with the jungle instilling in him an even greater
understanding of and humility towards it. “Taking a close look at what is around us there is a sort
of harmony. It is the harmony of overwhelming and collective murder. And we in comparison to
the articulate vileness and baseness and obscenity of all this jungle, we in comparison to that
enormous articulation, we only sound and look like badly pronounced and half finished
sentences out of a stupid suburban novel.” For Herzog, the Amazon itself is a place of
overwhelming misery and chaos, a place in which harmony does not exist. And yet he recognizes
in this disharmony a certain power and unity that cannot be contained and as such weighs down
heavily on those who enter it, forcing them to share in its burdens, its curse, and its vileness. He
admits to the camera and the viewer, “We have to get acquainted with this idea that there is no
real harmony as we have conceived it. But when I say this I say it all full of admiration for the
jungle. It is not that I hate it. I love it. I love it very much. But I love it against my better
judgment.”

Throughout the filming of *Fitzcarraldo*, as documented by Les Blank, Herzog faced
numerous set backs and bad surprises that he had not reckoned with. From the wet and muddy

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84 Matthew Gandy. *The Melancholy Observer. Landscape, neo-Romanticism, and the Politics of
Documentary Filmmaking*. 528, in: Brad Prager. *A Companion to Werner Herzog*. Oxford:
terrain into which the cast and crew would sink up to their knees, the weather uncertainties to which they were at mercy, and the tribal feuds and agitated emotions of the natives, to the constant technological failures, and the difficulties in the logistics of continually supplying their camps, Herzog was constantly battling against the jungle, the filming taking four slow years of great endurance and determination. “Of course we are challenging nature itself and it hits back. It just hits back, that’s all. And that’s what is grandiose about it. We just have to accept that it is much stronger than we are.”

Awed and yet simultaneously disgusted with the jungle, he describes it as being vile and base and of being in a constant state of misery, perpetual misery. “The trees here are in misery and the birds are in misery. I don’t think they sing. They just screech in pain,” he declares. Despite all of this misery and the countless troubles they had, when asked if he indeed had the strength to continue, he voiced, “How can you ask this question? If I abandon this project I would be a man without dreams and I don’t want to live like that. I live my life, I end my life with this project.”

For him, the jungle represented the key to fulfilling his dream. He needed only to accept the inherent difficulties of the jungle and learn to work with it rather than against it (as Fitzcarraldo realizes but Aguirre does not). This understanding coupled with the jungle’s fever dreams and physical exuberance come together to form a sort of “intensified form of reality” that lures and attracts Herzog against his better judgment.

Like the protagonists in his Amazonian films, Herzog refuses to give up and lose the battle against the invisible forces of the jungle, even if it means it will cost him his life. It is this resilient determination that characterizes Herzog and his films, Brad Prager, describing them as films that “aspire to reach beyond the bounds of prosaic language and inspire in the viewer an experience of sublimity.” Prager defines the sublime in terms of “the acknowledgement of the

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85 Herzog on the hardships faced during the filming of Fitzcarraldo in Burden of Dreams.
86 Burden of Dreams.
solitary subject’s lonesome struggle to impose categories, concepts, and meanings on grandiose or terrifying objects.” And indeed his films are about characters who, in struggling with the ‘grandiose or terrifying objects’ around them, in the case of Aguirre and Fitzcarraldo this implies the Amazonian Rainforest, also struggle against the inevitable identity formation/deformation they undergo. Herzog himself is one of these lone characters struggling against the vile beauty he sees in the forest.

CONCLUSION

Just as Herzog travels the globe in search of landscapes charged with hidden mysteries, which defy convention and even language itself at times, so too do Herzog’s characters defy convention. “My characters have no shadows. They come out of the darkness, and such people have no shadows […]. They are there, and then gone, to their obscurity.”⁸⁸ In working with the Amazon, Herzog’s films, as well as his protagonists, develop distinct instinctual rather than theoretical characteristics, their association with the jungle and its native inhabitants bringing to the forefront the innermost reflections of their personages. In attempting to maintain and/or bring order to a landscape that rebels against such western notions as Bildung, Herzog’s characters, as well as Daniel Kehlmann’s Alexander von Humboldt, mythologize the rainforest. In so doing, they not only solidify its mysteriousness but also simultaneously map out and chart their own identities in the process. Taking into consideration Thomas Szasz’s idea that a person does not discover his/her identity but rather creates it, so too are landscapes created. In other words, as stated previously, the landscapes are reshaped and molded after the fashion of the individual, who essentially works to make the jungle into an image of his very self. For Alexander von Humboldt, this image reflected an orderly, measured and harmonious environment in keeping with his German sense of exactitude. Aguirre attempted to recreate the jungle as his new kingdom, a throne from which he would defeat not only the Spanish Crown but conquer the world. And for Fitzcarraldo, the jungle took the form of an opera, or at least that is what he had attempted to accomplish.

⁸⁸ Gideon Bachmann. The Man on the Volcano: A Portrait of Werner Herzog. (Film Quarterly, 1977) 7.
Regardless of the images that these European characters projected onto the Amazon, one thing remains certain, that such a landscape, as Herzog very well knew and understood, was not merely a geographical location. Such landscapes embody locations at which identities are formed and self-discoversies take place. Such landscapes are “used to explore intimate, subjective, and imaginative spaces, putting the spectator in relationship to a private domain of embodied knowledge, which is based on subjective experience.” 89 For Alexander, Aguirre, and Fitzcarraldo, the jungle became the means towards charting not only the path their intended goals would take but also a more personal and inward driven path their identities would follow, traversing their deepest and most complex of emotions: passion, fear of the unknown, desire, greed, fascination, hatred.

Daniel Kehlmann’s Alexander von Humboldt was able to incorporate his conceptions of Bildung towards the implementation of his scientific endeavors, creating a peaceful relationship between himself and the jungle, consequently allowing for a more harmonious journey of identity-formation. His preconceived attitude towards the forest, namely his awe and respect for the jungle and his clear awareness of her powers, was from the outset influenced by his upbringing in an age of reformation of the German educational system; reformations led by his very own brother. Alexander represents then the highest standard of character formation, the ideal model for Wilhelm von Humboldt’s theories of Bildung, in that his educational development grew and expanded through his ever-hungry absorption of the plentitude of knowledge surrounding him in the form of the Amazon. The positive relationship established between himself and the primeval jungle allows Alexander to slowly mold, reaffirm and establish his identity as a German and Researcher.

Aguirre, on the other hand, underwent a steady process of identity deformation. The Amazon serves as fodder for his madness, incapacitating him and rendering him useless to help even himself. In stark contrast to Alexander von Humboldt’s notions and attitude toward the jungle, Aguirre began his journey with a vengeful and hateful stance. His compulsive desire to rid himself of the tyranny of the Spanish Crown and the miserable fate they had handed to him, Aguirre is blinded to the physicality of the world around him, almost as if unaware that he was right in the middle of the jungle and the very real danger she brings. All he could see was the City of Gold and a future full of riches and fame and power. In this exposed and weak state, the jungle became then not a force of positive change but of negative change. In attempting to take control of the jungle and ignoring the jungle as a force in its own right, Aguirre fails to learn from her (whether consciously as in the case of Alexander von Humboldt or subconsciously as with regards to Fitzcarraldo) and as such he represents an almost complete lack of Bildung. Due to his ideological rigidity and the capitalist greed of his colonial Spanish upbringing, he does not see the jungle as a means of self-improvement but as a means of revenge and power. For this reason he falls prey to the jungle’s tricks and illusions and the resulting consequences take shape in his loss of reality; his grip on reality slowly but steadily dwindling.

Fitzcarraldo, with his obsessive dreams of opera was not entirely successful in achieving his goal, but his journey of self-formation resulted in a more balanced individual, his dreams mellowing out and adapting if not merging with the will and power of the jungle. The pure and relatively simple desire to bring culture to the jungle resulted in a broader and deeper relationship with the jungle and in particular the indigenous Jivaro tribe. His dreams led him on a journey in which he learned to cooperate and work with the jungle instead of against her. Even if she won in the end, his failure was not a total defeat. In the greater scheme of Bildung then,
Fitzcarraldo represents a balanced convergence of European thought and Bildung with the harmonious chaos of nature, two forces working off each other to create something wholly unexpected and new.

For all three men, the jungle worked its powers, striking when it thought necessary and aiding when it felt merciful. Along their journeys, all three men experienced, to varying degrees, both attraction towards and a disavowal of the ‘mythical’ characteristics of the forest. Desirous of exploring more and yet wary of the physically cruelty, the men work out their own methods of coping, some more successful than others. Their insignificance and helplessness in the primeval forest is established almost from the outset, but it is precisely this insignificance that propels them and furnishes them with the opportunity necessary in creating a tapestry of experiences to be used in their identity-formations/deformations. Wilhelm von Humboldt believed that for self/identity-formation to take place, one must absorb all that is around us and offered us by the world and through one’s ‘Kraft’ and one’s own faculties to reshape and incorporate this bounty into oneself so as to establish and create a deeper, more harmonious connection between one’s own identity and nature. Success then depends on one’s perception of one’s role in shaping the world around us. As can be seen in Aguirre’s journey, success is not always forthcoming. What is clear, however, is that “nature is inside of us, its external presence articulating our innermost feelings.”

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90 Jacques de Villiers. Myth, Environment and Ideology in the German Jungle of Aguirre, the Wrath of God (Sense of Cinema 63, 2012).
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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