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# REAL MYTHS

## Wayne Switzer



fig. a. Still from the film *'Fitzcarraldo'*, Werner Herzog Archiv, Deutsche Kinemathek, Berlin.

Fitzcarraldo: «And what do the older Indians say?»  
Missionary: «We simply cannot cure them of their idea that ordinary life is only an illusion, behind which lies the reality of dreams.»  
*Fitzcarraldo*

«Everything possible to be believed is an image of truth.»  
*William Blake*

Given the amount of questionable media we encounter daily (from retouched photos to highly dubious reportage), the presence of the non-skeptic today is indeed a rare occurrence. Even if naïveté were a virtue, gullibility is not. This ‘grain of salt’ allows us a degree of protection as we sort through layers of fabrication in search for the genuine article. Hence, one of the pleasures of theater, literature and film is our temporary suspension of disbelief. We willingly forget and play along, lowering our guard as we allow ourselves to be taken somewhere. It is not a journey in the absence of doubt, rather a more sensitively calibrated one. Setting reality aside, what we call into question is the faithfulness of an author to their story or the fidelity of a director to a vision. It is a far more nuanced skepticism—one which extends beyond facts or absolute truth. The ‘grain of salt’, more finely ground.

In both the cinematic spectacle of *‘Fitzcarraldo’* and the monumental landscape sculpture *‘Himmelstreppe’*, we encounter two events which anticipate this condition of disbelief as a prerequisite. If doubt inherently implies being of two-minds (duplicity, Zweifel) then these endeavors can be viewed as two mirrors, not facing each other but held slightly askew—each offering a different perspective on the same object. Both projects occurred under unquestionably difficult circumstances, yet they achieve a poetic quality—illuminating the circumstances in which myth and reality can be authentically mediated. This via, not in spite of, immense skepticism.

What compels us to look closer is how this doubt, implicitly a mental tool for rational assessment, manifests itself in physical form, achieving material and also architectural, qualities. Blocks of terra cruda. A rusted steamship. The asphyxiating jungle. Feathers forged from iron. These are forms which defy rational thought—ephemeral objects which, much like disbelief, change with time. *‘Fitzcarraldo’* the film and *‘Himmelstreppe’* the building, are both indebted to stories from the past, however real or imagined they might be. Yet, the hallmarks of artifice are missing. In both cases we observe the authenticity of the myths, oscillating between the two narratives, to determine for ourselves whether we wish to take part.

## FEVER DREAMS

Directed by Werner Herzog, *‘Fitzcarraldo’* is the 1982 drama about a Scottish capitalist whose obsession with bringing opera to the ‘savages’ of the jungle leads him into the heart of the Amazon where he aims to make a quick fortune harvesting rubber to fund his mission. Convinced that a valuable but otherwise unreachable tract of land must be accessed, the character Brian Fitzcarraldo undertakes the hauling of his enormous steamship over a steep mountain slope. In his delirious resolve, he sets out to conquer not only the natural terrain but the people who dwell there as well: the sheer absurdity of his presence and clothing convince the natives to follow him and carry out this sisyphean undertaking. Both boat and entrepreneur eventually reach the top of the slope, only to have the native people release the ship to crash down the rapids as an offering to their gods. The real-life infamy of *‘Fitzcarraldo’* however, would occur in the production of the film, in which Herzog mobilized an entire film crew, specialists and hundreds of natives to enact the actual spectacle of pulling the colossal ship up a steep muddy incline in the Peruvian

jungle. Citing the need for an authentic representation of the event, the director insisted that using a model ship or special effects would compromise the film's integrity. Mired in mud and logistical problems, it would be two and a half years before Herzog would prevail in organizing a system of cables, winches and tractors to drag the boat to the top of the hill.

Recalling the genesis of the story, the director was inspired by an account he heard of one Carlos Fitzcarrald, a 19th century rubber baron, who in order to cross from one river system into another, crossed a narrow isthmus by having his ship disassembled and carried piece by piece to the other side where it was reassembled.<sup>1</sup> The vision of an entire steamship scaling a jungle hill to the operatic voice of Caruso was Herzog's contribution. In a twist of irony, the film about an all-consuming desire to build an opera, in actuality created one. A semi-factual account of a rubber baron had now become one of the grandiose myths of cinema.

A few years after *Fitzcarraldo*'s ship had scaled the jungle, another fever dream was taking shape. This one in the middle of a desert plain in southern Morocco—the vision of a colossal earthen pyramid, a staircase rising towards the sky. After a decade of planning *Himmelstreppe*, the artist Hannsjörg Voth had traveled to this remote interior in search of an unspoiled landscape from which his idea could emerge. Though the daunting realization of this project resembled Herzog's in spirit, Voth's intention would be quite different: rather than conquering a slope of earth before him, he planned to build one.

«*Himmelstreppe*» is a 23 meter long, 18 meter high pyramid of compacted raw earth. It was built primarily by a community of local nomads who were hired partly due to their experience with rammed earth technique, a traditional labor-intensive building method using only the *terra cruda* at hand. It would become the first of three remarkable landscape sculptures constructed in the Marha Plain, each mythic in their proportions and profound in their material presence.

The primary inspiration for Voth's sky staircase began, however, not with material, but with Icarus, whose mythological flight upwards represented a moment of pure ecstasy. Icarus, who forsook the advice of his father Daedalus and plummeted into the sea. The indelible moment when his waxen wings melted and broke apart, confirming his doubt. Not coincidentally, it was in this parable demonstrating the limits of man's ingenuity in the face of Nature, that *Himmelstreppe* took root.

## UNDER THE SPELL OF A LANDSCAPE

The Marha plain from which the image of *Himmelstreppe* emerged, was indeed an extreme dreamscape: an expanse of raw desert, cracked and strewn with sharp stones. From this hostile terra thorny bushes emerged, gnarled and tough enough to withstand the hot winds lashing across the plain. But Voth was enthralled. No stranger to unconventional interventions, a previous project of his saw an enormous steel pyramid erected on piles hovering above a lake. Another installation resulted in a massive figure lying prostrate, wrapped in shrouds, floating on a river-barge.

In describing Voth's various artistic depictions of the Marha landscape, art critic Lothar Romain remarked that «his fantastical drawings had created a place which depicted, not a distant european view, but a testimony towards a new totality»<sup>2</sup>. Suspending disbelief, any logistical difficulties would have to be overcome in service to this image. Perhaps intentionally, Voth had arrived under the spell of his mind's own landscape.

However mythological the Peruvian tropical rainforest appeared in the film *«Fitzcarraldo»*, the consequences of filming there were quite real to Werner Herzog. Rather than seeking a resourceful balance with the landscape, the director saw a common ground of perpetual violence. In the documentary *«Burden of Dreams»* he is scathing when describing the heartlessness of the Amazon, even as it has earned his full respect. Practically spitting the words out in disgust, he describes the jungle as «full of obscenity, [...] vile and base»<sup>3</sup>. The ruthless felling of rainforest trees combined with the heavy machinery churning up jungle soil during filming coincided with the inherent brutality Herzog sensed in the place. Though he had personally sought out the location to film, the director was under no false pretense, seeing not the slightest trace of romance or even eroticism—the only harmony being one of «collective murder»<sup>4</sup>. Moments later he would clarify the statement, admitting that in fact he loved, not hated, the jungle but that he loved it «against his better judgement»<sup>5</sup>.

## UNCERTAINTIES

«It wasn't possible for me to allow myself private feelings of doubt while making the film. I never had the privilege of despair; had I hesitated or panicked for a single second, the entire project would have come tumbling down upon me.»<sup>6</sup>

The eerie stoicism maintained by Herzog would prove crucial to overcoming the immense doubts which threatened to undermine his decisions. Besides the logistics of moving a massive steamship, waves of uncertainty had begun moving through the production team. Shooting began badly when the original star fell ill to dysentery and was forced to resign. The film's financial backers had expressed legitimate reservations about funding what they felt to be a hopeless effort. Amidst slanderous accusations of worker exploitation some crew members began to plan an exit from the film. Yet the director would not yield. When asked if his resolve had diminished, Herzog resolutely stated: «If I abandon this project, I will be a man without dreams [...] I live my life or I end my life with this project.»<sup>7</sup>

It is unimaginable that Voth had not anticipated difficulties. The artist was anything but naïve when the coordination of his projects was at stake. Yet, his written accounts during the construction of the *Himmelstreppe* convey an almost feverish disbelief when describing the demotivating hardships and logistical conundrums which occurred on a daily basis. Unlike the environmental troubles which prevailed on the set of *«Fitzcarraldo»*, most of the complications at *«Himmelstreppe»* involved the local workers. In his letters to his wife and collaborator Ingrid, Voth describes «another arduous day» on the building site: «I then checked the stakes which had been cobbled together the day before. None of them were perpendicular. Then I checked



fig. b. Hannsjörg Voth mit Flügeln, 1987, Photography: Ingrid Amslinger.

the new formwork. Its size was also wrong. Upon seeing how Seddik lazily stood around the well not working, I could take no more and raged for an hour long.»<sup>8</sup> In worse cases, the artist became despondent. «I returned to the tent dejected. What I would have most liked to have said to them: Just build whatever you like. Something is bound to come out of it.»<sup>9</sup>

## ECSTATIC TRUTH

Though the innumerable setbacks which plagued «Fitzcarraldo» would only contribute to its mythos, the enormous effort behind the film had little to do with heroic folly. Unquestionably, Herzog's determination to create an authentic event was an ethical stance: an unnerving faithfulness he would strive for in future films which were mostly met with critical acclaim. Yet, however convincing the final results were, his unorthodox techniques continued to perplex. Some 25 years later, during the filming of the action film «Rescue Dawn», his cinematographer would reflect that «though Herzog had spent his life making movies, [...] he cannot accept the illusion of filmmaking»<sup>10</sup>.

What becomes clear is that Herzog's concern was not that the audience would doubt the factual basis of the film, but rather its «authenticity». In trying to make sense of this search for a more profound honesty, he revealed that «there is such a thing as poetic, ecstatic truth. It is mysterious and elusive, and can be reached only through fabrication and imagination and stylization»<sup>11</sup>. For the director, what mattered was that the audience believed the reality of the myth.

If the vision of Herzog's steamship lurching up the muddy slope is the methodical displacement of doubt, then Voth's «Himmelstreppe» is a memorial to it. From the pinnacle of the staircase, one descends into the volume, arriving at a gallery level. The silence is palpable. Perched on a stand, forged in iron, are a set of outstretched wings. In the presence of these metallic appendages, the aftermath of Icarus' fall is finally understood. It is the lament of Daedelus. The pyramid as a tomb. The wings as they should have been. The desert plain as the remnants of a sea.

«I wish to give form to the desire to rise above one's own limitations»<sup>12</sup> wrote Voth. This desire, embodied in both Icarus and Daedalus, may have inspired «Himmelstreppe», but a deeper resolve in human ability and vision brought about its authenticity. One can imagine the disbelief of the nomadic people who watched as this earthen wedge arose from their desert. Almost in spite of itself, «Himmelstreppe» had become a mirage in two etymological instances: The Latin (*mirare*) meaning a reflective desert illusion. The Arabic (*miraj*) meaning a ladder, or an ascent.

## ASCENT

In speaking about the presence of landscape in art and culture, the video artist Bill Viola noted that rather than distinguishing physical and mental landscapes, his interest lay in «the tension, the transition, the exchange, and the resonance between these two modalities that energize and define our reality»<sup>13</sup>. We recognize similar resonances in our

most celebrated art forms—moments where the physical and psychological tenuously coexist, underscoring one another. Certainly this duality occurs in both *Fitzcarraldo* and *Himmelstreppe*, but taking Viola's observation further, is it truly reality which is being defined? In service to a myth, we witness factual events so immense and anachronistic that they themselves become mythic. Voth and Herzog, we assume, are in search of a deeper truth.

Lothar Romain again writes of ascending «Himmelstreppe», «The last step is neither an end nor a goal, rather just the last bodily step towards a possible transcendence.»<sup>14</sup> It is here we are asked to re-focus our lens in order see past what is given—both the physical and mental landscape. Paradoxically, it is this blurring of reality which brings a degree of clarity to the experience. It is the moment when the tradition of mythology is continued, one of storytelling and dialogue—the giving of oneself to the myth, dreaming the feverish dreams of one who nears the sun.

- 1 Les Blank, *Burden of Dreams*, Screenplay by Michael Goodwin, Flower Films, 1982, Min 00:02:30.
- 2 Lothar Romain, «Kein Turm von Babylon», in: Heinz Neidel (Hrsg.), *Hannsjörg Voth Hassi Romi*, Nürnberg 1989, p. 12.
- 3 Les Blank, *Burden of Dreams*, Min 00:02:31.
- 4 Ibid, Min 01:22:32.
- 5 Ibid, Min 01:23:43.
- 6 Paul Cronin, *Werner Herzog. A Guide for the Perplexed: Conversations with Paul Cronin*, London 2014, p. 304.
- 7 Les Blank, *Burden of Dreams*, Min 00:14:33.
- 8 Heinz Neidel (Hrsg.), *Hannsjörg Voth Hassi Romi*, Nürnberg 1989, p. 103.
- 9 Ibid, p. 82.
- 10 Daniel Zalewski, «The Ecstatic Truth», in: *The New Yorker*, 24. April 2006.
- 11 Werner Herzog, «Minnesota Declaration: Lessons in Darkness», Walker Art Museum, Minneapolis Minnesota 30 April 1999.
- 12 Lothar Romain, «Kein Turm von Babylon», in: Heinz Neidel (Hrsg.), *Hannsjörg Voth Hassi Romi*, Nürnberg 1989, p. 10.
- 13 Robert Violette (Hrsg.), *Bill Viola: Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House, Writings 1973–1994*, MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts 1995, p. 149.
- 14 Lothar Romain, «Kein Turm von Babylon», in: Heinz Neidel (Hrsg.), *Hannsjörg Voth Hassi Romi*, Nürnberg 1989, p. 12.

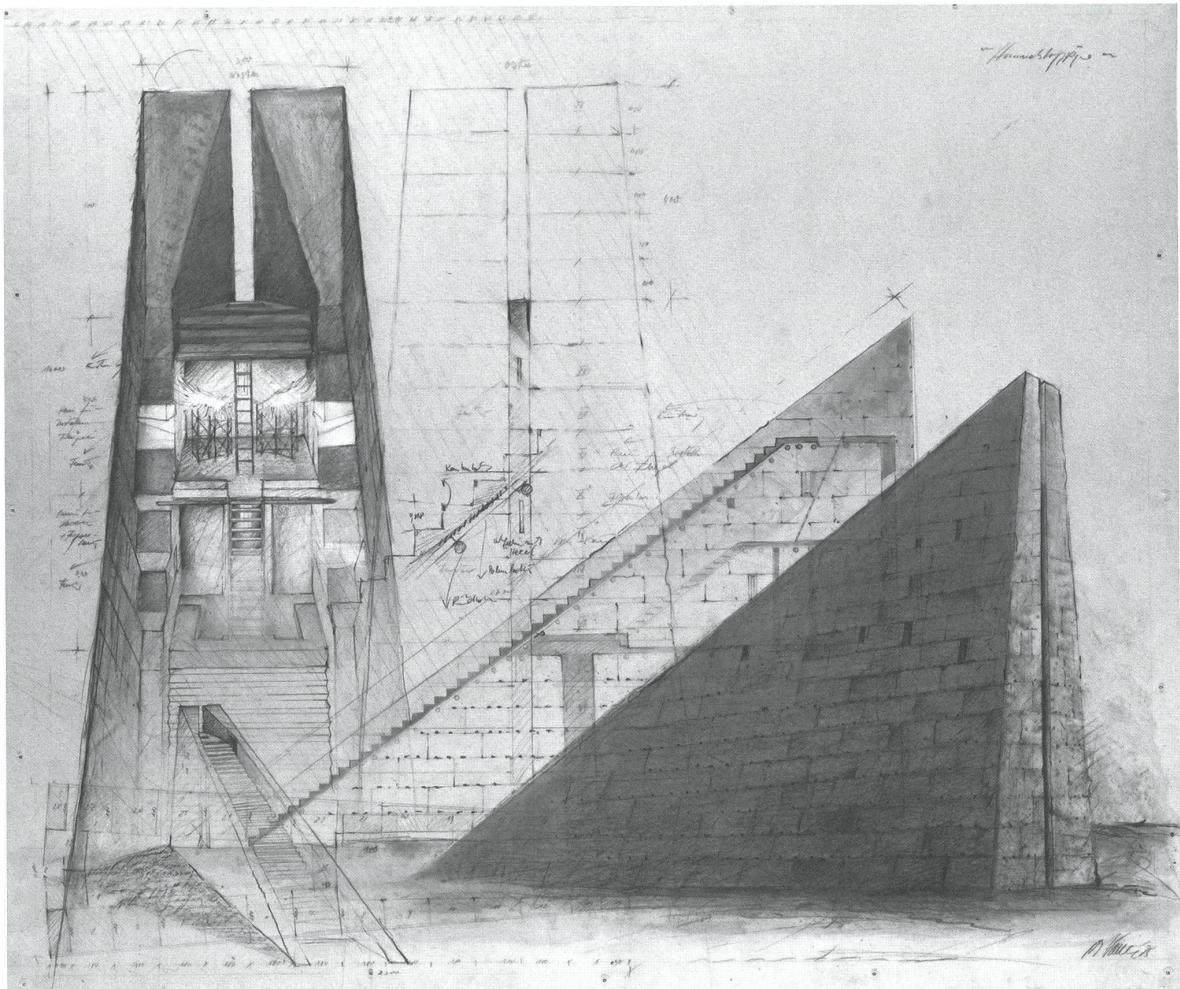


fig. c. Hannsjörg Voth, *Himmelstreppe Skizze*, 1980.

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