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MOVIE REVIEW | 'COBRA VERDE'

Where Heart of Darkness Begets Head of Nuttiness



Werner Herzog Filmproduktion

Klaus Kinski, center, as the titular bandit in Werner Herzog's "Cobra Verde."

By A. O. SCOTT
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Werner Herzog's great subject, or rather his dominant preoccupation — what paranoia was to Alfred Hitchcock or violence to Sam Peckinpah — is mania. The characters in his most memorable films are men who live in a permanent, irrational state of war with themselves, with the rest of humanity, with the wild inscrutability of the natural world. They are loners, conquerors, obsessives. In his recent documentaries, notably "Grizzly Man" and "The White Diamond." Mr. Herzog observes them with rueful philosophical detachment. There was a time, though, when the grandeur and ferocity of his cinematic ambition marked him as a kindred spirit.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the films he made starring Klaus Kinski, an actor who has been called many things (not least by Mr. Herzog himself) but never mild-mannered. "Aguirre: The Wrath of God" (1972) is the most celebrated of these, and "Fitzcarraldo" (1982) has a certain

notoriety, in part because of "Burden of Dreams." Les Blank's fascinating, appalling documentary about its making. But "Cobra Verde," completed in 1987, was the project that pushed the always volatile relationship between Mr. Herzog and Mr. Kinski (memorialized in Mr. Herzog's 1999 documentary "My Best Fiend") to the brink of homicide, and for some reason it has never been released in this country. Connoisseurs of craziness need wait no longer. "Cobra Verde" opens today in all its feral, baffling glory.

Along with "Aguirre" and "Fitzcarraldo," "Cobra Verde" completes a trilogy of mayhem

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and megalomania in hot climates. Mr. Kinski is the title character, a Brazilian rancher, originally known as Francisco Manoel da Silva, who turns to banditry after being driven from his land by drought and famine. A solitary, vengeful figure, filmed like the debauched cousin of a [Sergio Leone](#) spaghetti-western hero, da Silva roams the dusty 19th-century backlands, shooting, drinking and womanizing. Eventually he is hired as an overseer by a soft, decadent sugar planter, but he runs into trouble when his employer's three daughters wind up pregnant with little Cobras. The local bigwigs ship da Silva off to Africa to administer the faltering slave trade, assuming he won't come back alive. At that point things start to get really strange.

Based on a novel by Bruce Chatwin, "Cobra Verde" has some of the political feverishness of [Gillo Pontecorvo's "Burn!."](#) in which [Marlon Brando](#) played an 19th-century British adventurer messing around in a Caribbean slave revolt. Mr. Pontecorvo used melodrama as a mode of historical analysis, but Mr. Herzog does the opposite. The cynical power games and brutal economics of the slave trade are part of the story he tells, though not really its point. After a while the story itself fades into the background, overwhelmed by Mr. Herzog's intoxicating, intoxicated sense of spectacle.

It is tempting to say that, in his African and South American adventures, Mr. Herzog, born in Munich and educated, among other places, in Pittsburgh, succumbed to the lure of the tropics and went native. But that would be to underestimate both the extremity and the integrity of his films, in which he sets out to show that he, and by extension the part of the world that fancies itself civilized, is far more savage than any Amazonian or African tribe. The Africans in "Cobra Verde" are hardly the noble, natural men of Western romance; they are as mad and capricious as da Silva himself.

Watching "Cobra Verde," you feel at times that Mr. Herzog, like a figure out of Joseph Conrad, is in danger of losing his way, or even his mind. His eye, however, never deserts him, and the final third of this film contains sequences of horrifying sublimity and ethereal beauty, moments that have a clarity and power beyond the reach of reason.

COBRA VERDE

Opens today in Manhattan.

Directed by [Werner Herzog](#); written (in German, with English subtitles) by Mr. Herzog, based on the novel "The Viceroy of Ouidah" by Bruce Chatwin; director of photography, Viktor Ruzicka; edited by Maximiliane Mainka; music by Popol Vuh; production designer, Ulrich Bergfelder; produced by Lucki Stipetic; released by 518 Media, Inc. At the IFC Center, 323 Avenue of the Americas at Third Street, Greenwich Village. Running time: 110 minutes. This film is not rated.

WITH: [Klaus Kinski](#) (Francisco Manoel da Silva a k a Cobra Verde), King Ampaw (Taparica), José Lewgoy (Don Octavio Coutinho), Salvatore Basile (Captain Fraternidade), Nana Agyefi Kwame II of Nsein (King Bossa Ahadee) and Benito Stefanelli (Captain Pedro Vincente).

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