

Stockbridge Community Cinema

Programme Notes 20 January 2017

EMBRACE OF THE SERPENT (12A)

(El abrazo de la serpiente)

Director: Ciro Guerra

Starring: Nilbio Torres, Jan Bijvoet, Antonio Bolivar, Brionne Davis

2016

2hrs 5mins



“Before he can become a warrior a man has to leave everything behind and go into the jungle guided only by his dreams. In that journey he has to discover completely alone, who he really is. Some get lost and never come back”

Tracking two parallel odysseys through the Amazon, this historical epic from Colombian filmmaker Ciro Guerra offers ethno-botanical adventure, mysticism, and a heart-rending depiction of colonialism laying waste to indigenous culture.

In 1909, Theo an ailing German explorer and scientist enlists the help of a young shaman Karakamate, the most powerful in the region, in his search for the rare sacred and difficult-to-find psychedelic Yakruna flower that he believes could cure him of his fatal illness. Their journey takes them through rivers and jungles ravaged by European interference, climaxing at a mission where a sadistic Spanish priest lords over a huddle of young indigenous orphans. In a parallel narrative set in the same region in 1940 American explorer Evan conducts his own search for the elusive flower in the company of the same, now aged, shaman in a landscape brutalized by the rubber trade. Years of voluntary isolation have drained all memories and emotions from Karamakate’s soul but he gradually awakens as they journey into the impenetrable Amazonian rainforest. Like the converging river current, his forgotten past interweaves with the present, revealing the fate of his people, the Cohiuano, and his previous quest for the plant as a young shaman.

The film was inspired by the real-life journals and austere black & white anthropological photos of two explorers (Theodor Koch-Grünberg and Richard Evans Schultes) who travelled through the Colombian Amazon during the last century in search of the Yakruna plant. This dreamlike pursuit of knowledge is illustrated through spectacular cinematography with the highest respect for the spirit of the jungle and conveying a deeply emotional message. Recalling such visionary films as Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man* and Werner Herzog's *Aguirre, the Wrath of God*, this elegiac adventure story surveys a vanishing way of life and the natural world that we neglect (and abuse) at our peril.

Shot in mesmerising monochrome, director Guerra reverses the usual hackneyed focus from white saviour and a noble ‘savage’ so that their journeys are seen through Karamakate’s eyes instead - and it’s a welcome change. Full of visual flair, haunting mysticism and an unstoppable moral conviction, *Embrace of the Serpent* is by turns astonishing and terrifyingly ferocious; both a hypnotically beautiful ode to life in the Amazon and an unequivocally searing critique of the harrowing effects of colonialism. You will be thinking about it for days after.

The film marks the first time Colombia has ever been nominated for an Academy Award for Best Film in a Foreign Language

Extract from an interview in the Guardian on 6 June 2016 with Director Ciro Guerra

Research for the Film

I spent about two and a half years going back and forth around the Colombian Amazon, which is a very big place — about the size of France. The first year I was doing more theoretical research in libraries, reading books and articles. I had an anthropologist friend who knows a lot of people in the Amazon and has worked with them in several places. We'd go with him and stay at the houses of elders, shamans, families and people who were close to him. We spent a lot of time talking and watching the places.

It was also location scouting. I was looking, in the first place, to see if we could do the movie there. We needed places that were reachable by air, in which the rivers had banks, because a lot of the movie takes place on river banks. We also needed rocks and rapids. In the Amazon, there are so many different kinds of rivers — rivers that are white, red, black, green, brown. The Amazon is not just one thing, there are so many different shades to different places. There are places where the mosquitoes can be really insufferable, in which there are very little fauna. So, a lot of different considerations, all of which add up to what feels right

Difficulty of dealing with a native language

Both Jan and Brionne, the Belgian and the American actors, took a huge chance: come to Colombia, come shoot the film in the jungle, and do it in indigenous languages. They were taught how to say phonetically every word, every phrase, and what they meant. They took months to prepare and when they arrived in the location, they would speak and the indigenous people would understand perfectly - they do their homework with a lot of commitment and passion.

With the Amazonian actors, I could speak in Spanish. It's not their first language, but they all understand and speak it. For me, it was a very interesting experience, because since you don't understand the dialogue, you're not thinking about whether the text is right or not. You're thinking about whether the emotion is right and comes through beyond the words. I think that's the way you should direct.

The practical aspects of shooting on the river

We must have spent about two weeks on the water. For me, the most difficult scenes to shoot were the quiet scenes on the boat in the middle of the river, because the river is constantly moving. We had a boat for the actors, but we also had a boat for the camera, a boat for the sound, a boat for the wardrobe and makeup, and a boat for production. So putting five boats together for a shot, we only had one minute before they would drift away. Those scenes that are very quiet and don't seem so complicated were the most complex, because you need to synchronize all this with the stream of the river and the actors.

How has the film been received?

In Colombia, it was released on the independent circuit, because the theatre owners didn't think that theatregoers would go see an Amazonian film in black and white. It got a very small release, but it did very well in that small release. After the film became an Oscar nominee, then it got a wide release in all the theatres. The numbers have been tremendous.

The interesting thing about the first release is that it sparked a lot of debate. On one side, there was political debate, and there was also scientific debate in the anthropological community, and there was also, of course, cinematographic debate about representation and the film in and of itself. Some anthropologists didn't see the film as a work of fiction, so they insisted on pointing out the things that were not accurate. But the film is clearly a work of fiction, so there was a debate on to what extent you can fictionalize certain things. There was also a debate on how true the representation of the Amazon is, and a debate on where the film stands politically. It was well received by people on several sides of the political stage, so some people needed the film to make its political stance more clearly. Left-wing people wanted the film to be more clearly left- or right-wing. It's a strange thing, when people want the film to have such clear politics. But I'm not interested in that; I'm interested in the grey zones and contradictions of this political debate, rather than making political statements.