



**Patron: Jim Broadbent**

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**Friday March 24th 2017**

## **Embrace of the Serpent (Cert 12a)**

*dir:* **Ciro Guerra**

*Starring:* **Nilbio Torres, Jan Bijvoet, Antonio Bolivar**

*Sponsor:* **Marilyn Tompkins**

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**Synopsis:** While travelling in the Colombian Amazon in the early 20th century, ethnologist Théodor von Martius is taken seriously ill. He seeks Karamakate, a local shaman, who he believes will lead him to the yakruna, a rare plant with healing powers. At first hostile to the idea, Karamakate agrees to help von Martius to find the plant when he hears the latter claims to have spent time with his people. They journey to Karamakate's former home but when they arrive, they find it in ruins. Karamakate destroys the last specimen of the plant in anger before Théodor can be treated.

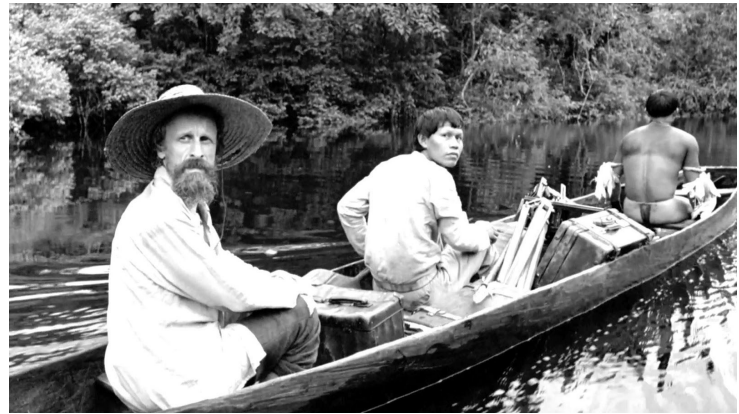
40 years later, Evan (another explorer) follows in von Martius's footsteps. He too finds Karamakate, now an old man, and asks for his help in tracking down the plant. Seeing a chance to recover fading memories, Karamakate agrees. They find one specimen which Karamakate turns into a drug and gives to him. Evan has hallucinations. When he awakes, the shaman has disappeared.

It's not surprising that *Embrace of the Serpent* is the first Colombian feature to be nominated for an Oscar. Its director, **Ciro Guerra**, is a precocious filmmaker who shares the great Latin knack for telling stories that are politically and culturally specific, yet with such flair that they will resonate anywhere. And he's been steadily building towards this kind of impact.

His first film, *The Wandering Shadows* (2004) was an unusual, darkly comic and poignant drama about a misfit underclass in modern-day Bogotá; his second *The Wind Journeys* (2009), a colourful fable about a legendary accordion player on the road with a boy desperate to imbibe his magic, had sequences that were both cinematic and musical *tours de force*. And now his third, a near faultless amalgam of anthropology, character-driven drama and adventure that is visually resplendent, emotive, at times surprisingly witty and deeply mysterious. It's also a roar of protest against colonialism, told from the perspective of an indigenous protagonist - not cinema's first such character but one of its most memorable.

The film is inspired by the journals of two real-life explorers, Theodor Koch-Grünberg and the American botanist Richard Evans-Schultes, who explored the north-west Amazon in the first half of the 20th century. Guerra and co-writer Jacques Toulemonde have conjured a fictional knit of their experiences, running two parallel stories 40 years apart, involving two explorers and the shaman Karamakate, who guides them through an Amazonian heart of darkness.

The themes and tone of Conrad's novel loom large here, albeit transposed from another continent, as the travellers experience the



horrific aftermath of the rubber boom in the jungle. In the first journey, Karamakate, explorer Théo and his local companion Manduca encounter a mutilated man who is clumsily bleeding rubber sap from the trees and begs them to kill him. At a Catholic mission, a priest ministers to 'orphans of the rubber war' by denying them their own language and then flogging them. And what was once Karamakate's village now seems caught up in a border war with Peru, its only occupants white men high on the psychedelic yakruna plant.

Forty years later, when Karamakate returns with American botanist Evan, the mission has become the playground of a barking mad self-styled 'messiah', who encourages anyone who displeases him to commit suicide. The scene inevitably brings to mind another riverside hell and another madman, Kurtz. But what distinguishes *Embrace of the Serpent* from Conrad and Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* is its choice of protagonist. The Westerners here merely provide the set-up for the film's actual refreshing subject: the shaman.

As a young man Karamakate instructs the boys in the mission, "Don't let our song fade away"; years later, he believes he's become a *chullachaqui*, an empty copy of himself, the last of his tribe, his failing memory removing his sense of tribal identity. So much South American cinema is about identity - not surprisingly, given that the continent's history is scarred by genocide and the 'disappeared' victims of dictatorship. Karamakate's final attempt to rediscover his own identity feels like a homage to thousands of others before him.

He's a compelling figure, beautifully acted by the two Amazonian performers. Nilbio Torres is a boisterously athletic figure, near naked frame dominated by striking tribal necklace. He's proud, angry and belligerent, but with a goofy humour that surfaces as he warms to his travelling companions. In contrast, Antonio Bolivar lends the older Karamakate wisdom and calm, and the humour has become droll. When Evan claims, "I devote my life to plants," the old man replies, "That's the most reasonable thing I've ever heard a white man say."

Karamakate's insistence that Théo and Evan are in effect the same man, a result of the jungle's temporal magic, is given substance by the editing, which has some masterful transitions between the timelines. Théo's boat is moving upstream in the darkness, when the camera stops following, pauses, then turns as another boat containing Evan and the older shaman moves towards it. It's a

sublime moment, one of many captured by David Gallego's crisp and sumptuous black-and-white photography, which gives the jungle a sculpted magnificence and makes the river seem a sinuously muscular, living thing.

The film switches to colour for the drug trip that's been beckoning one of these two explorers from the beginning. Its modest depiction is a far cry from the flamboyant Mexican high of Ken Russell's *Altered States* (1980) and in keeping with a film that honours the mysteries and majesty of a lost world.

## Credits

<b>Nilbio Torres</b>	Young Karamakate
<b>Antonio Bolivar Salvador</b>	Old Karamakate
<b>Jan Bijvoet</b>	Théodor van Martius/Théo
<b>Brionne Davis</b>	Evan
<b>Yauenkü Migue</b>	Manduca
<b>Director</b>	Ciro Guerra
<b>Screenplay</b>	Ciro Guerra/Jacques Toulemonde
<b>Director of Photography</b>	David Gallego
<b>Editor</b>	Etienne Boussac
<b>Production design</b>	Angélica Perea
<b>Original music</b>	Nascuy Linares
<b>Sound design</b>	Carlos Garcia
<b>Costume</b>	Catherine Rodriguez
	<b>Colombia/Venezuela 2015</b>
	<b>124 mins</b>

## Another view

For 350 years, Spain built a vast empire in South America based on the labor and exploitation of the Indian population, forcing them to accept Christianity while decimating their culture, religion, and even their language. In the late 19th and early 20th Centuries, "rubber barons" rounded up all the Indians and forced them to tap rubber out of the trees in rainforest zones leading to slavery and human rights abuses. Winner of the top Director's Fortnight Award at Cannes and Colombia's submission to the Oscars in the Best Foreign Film category, *Ciro Guerra's* ("The Wind Journeys") ***Embrace of the Serpent*** (*El abrazo de la serpiente*) provides a powerful insight into the effects of colonialism on an indigenous population.

The film, in which nine different languages are spoken, follows two interconnected stories based on the travel journals of two Amazonian explorers thirty years apart, German scientist Theodor Koch-Grünberg (Jan Bijvoet, "Borgman") and American plant enthusiast Richard Evans Schultes (Brionne Davis, "Fire City: End of Days"). Both men are seeking the Yakruna plant to discover its powerful ability to heal. The two explorers are accompanied by the Amazonian shaman Karamakate (Nilbio Torres as a young man and Antonio Bolivar as the elder) not only to find the sacred plant for research purposes but to learn deeper truths about themselves and the nature of reality. Karamakate, the last surviving member of his tribe, guards the secrets of Yakruna, a last symbol of independence for his people.

Shot in black and white by cinematographer David Gallego ("Cecilia"), it is the first film to be shot on location in the Amazon in thirty years and its gorgeous kaleidoscope of rivers and forests, and the blending of time creates a surreal, dreamlike atmosphere, fortified by native songs and chants. As the film begins, a young Karamakate, armed with a spear and dressed in native attire, stands menacingly as a boat approaches the shore containing the German scientist and his companion Manduca (Yauenkü Migue), a native dressed in white man's clothing.

Manduca asks the shaman to cure the explorer who is very sick, but Karamakate, who is familiar with the destructive nature of the

white man, refuses. When Theodor tells him, however, that he has seen survivors of his people and will take him to them, the young shaman agrees as long as the white man follows his "prohibitions" about disturbing the natural flow of the jungle. The two scientists, Theodor in 1909 and Evan in 1940, follow the same path and explore the same places drastically changed over the years.

Karamakate, as he did with Theodor, acts as Evan's guide and considers himself as a "chullachaqui," an empty shell of a human being, and must become a man once more in tune with nature. Two scenes stand out. After a night of singing and dancing with a native group and demonstrating Western technology, Theodor becomes angry when a member of the group wants to keep his compass in exchange for goods. To rationalize his anger, he tells Karamakate that owning a compass would disturb their traditions of finding locations through the sun and stars, but the shaman tells him, "You cannot forbid them to learn. Knowledge belongs to all men." The other scene is one of pure horror when a priest (Luigi Sciamanna, "Secreto de Confesion") at a Spanish mission is found brutally whipping his young students until Theodor intervenes.

Despite an element of religious madness that feels out of sync with the tone of the film, ***Embrace of the Serpent*** soars when its focus is on spiritual awareness. The shaman tells both scientists the need to unburden themselves of their material possessions and explore the mystery of consciousness alone without their physical and psychological baggage. They cannot be cured of their illness, he tells them, because they have forgotten how to dream. After Evan ingests a native plant following a heated exchange with Karamakate, a montage of brilliant, swirling colors pushes the boundary of what we think is real and allows us to remember how to dream.

**Howard Schumann: A Critical Movie Critic.**

## Our next screening: Friday March 31st 2017, 7.30pm **The Clan (Argentina 2016. Cert 15)**

Based on a true story and directed by Pablo Trapero, *The Clan* (as with his films *Carancho*, *White Elephant*), reflects aspects of life under the rule of the military government in Argentina in the 1970s and 80s. The Puccio family are outwardly prosperous and respectable. But beneath the veneer, the family runs a kidnapping, torture and extortion business that Don Corleone would surely approve of.

## Programme news

### Films for next season

We will be choosing the films for next season in a little over 2 weeks time. While we cannot say for certain which films will be included in the programme, members may like to know that among those being considered are

- Elle (France 2016),
- Toni Erdmann (Germany 2016)
- The Salesman (Iran 2016)
- Certain Women (USA 2016)
- The Eagle Huntress (UK 2016)
- The Unknown Girl (Belgium 2016)
- Paterson (USA 2016)
- Graduation (Romania 2016)
- The Young Offenders (Ireland 2016)
- Hunt for the Wilderpeople (New Zealand 2015)

We expect to be able to announce details of the new season at our film on April 21st.