



JUNGLE FEVER

Inverting the perspective of 'Heart of Darkness'-style dramas to explore the ravages of colonialism from the viewpoint of the indigenous population, Colombian director Ciro Guerra's 'Embrace of the Serpent' is a dream-like examination of an Amazonian shaman leading two Western explorers into the jungle during the first half of the 20th century

By Tom Graham

"In this moment, it is not possible for me to know, dear reader, if the infinite jungle has started on me the process that has taken many others that have ventured into these lands, to complete and irremediable insanity... all I know is that, like all those who have shed the thick veil that blinded them, when I came back to my senses, I had become another man."

The man transformed was Theodor Koch-Grünberg, a German ethnologist who ventured into the Amazon at the turn of the 20th century. His journals, along with those of the American biologist Richard Evans Schultes who followed in his footsteps 30 years later, are what inspired Ciro Guerra's *Embrace of the Serpent* – the Colombian director's third feature following *The Wandering Shad-ows* (2004), a darkly comic portrait of life in modern-day Colombia, and *The Wind Journeys*, a bittersweet tale of an ageing accordionist that screened in Un Certain Regard at Cannes in 2009.

In Guerra's Oscar-nominated film, the explorers Théo and Evan are loosely based on their namesakes. Théo is mortally ill and racing to find the yakruna, a sacred plant he hopes may save him. Evan is soul-sick and cannot dream, but hopes the plant may teach him. Both are guided by Karamakate, an Amazonian shaman who is probably the last survivor of his tribe. As a virile youth, he guides Théo in the slender hope of finding other members of his tribe; 30 years later, a broken man, he believes he has lost his true self and become his *chul-lachaqui* – a figure in Amazonian mythology which is a hollow, ghost-like replica of a person – looking to find what's left of himself.

Guerra and I met in Bogotá to discuss his film, ahead of its UK release on 10 June.

Tom Graham: You draw on the writings of Theodor Koch-Grünberg and Richard Evans Schultes, but your film is a work of fiction. Is there a responsibility and a limit to how much you can fictionalise such documents?

Ciro Guerra: The decision to fictionalise most of it was because of our responsibility to the indigenous people. They specifically asked us not to use the names of their plants, for instance, because these things are sacred. But I soon realised that I was not looking to make an ethnographic or anthropological document. I was interested in the truth behind all that: the relationship which these people have with the plants and the world. That's the point that comes across in the film, but the details are completely fictional. Although I've been told there are now people trying to sell yakruna.

TG: So the details are fictionalised, but are the events in the film based on true events?

CG: Only the crazier ones. Like the Western missionary they meet who has convinced the Indians he is the Messiah – that really happened, and it was much more demented than what you see in the film. A mestizo called Niceto came to the border of Colombia and Brazil at the end of the 19th century and proclaimed that he was the Messiah. He came to have around 2,000 followers and they got so out of control that the Brazilian army had to go and remove him. Then 20 years later there was another guy who claimed to be the Messiah and that time it ended in a mass suicide. Even today on the border of Colombia and Peru you can find a group of indigenous people who call themselves the 'Real Israelis of the Holocaust', although their Messiah died about five years ago. This phenomenon of Amazonian Messiahs is a very real thing.

TG: We've seen that before, in *Apocalypse Now* [1979], for example. There we have the usual narrative of the Westerner going into the jungle and losing their mind, but your film is an inversion of that.

CG: The idea that has dominated the Western jungle narrative is that the jungle drives you mad. But when you go to the jungle and spend time with the indigenous people you realise that it's not the jungle that drives you mad, but rather that madness is in the hearts of men and the jungle can release it. That's the way the indigenous people see it. So we flipped that point of view completely. Some people think we took the Messiah scene from *Apocalypse Now*, but *Apocalypse Now* took it from the real stories. However, they did not give it the Catholic twist, and that was very real in the Amazon. It was a mad syncretism of Catholicism and paganism.

TG: You've spent a lot of time in the Amazon with indigenous people. What differences did you observe between Western and indigenous modes of storytelling?

CG: I spent three and half years going to the Amazon. The film is an attempt to build a bridge between Western and Amazonian storytelling, because if you read Amazonian mythology, it has a completely different narrative logic. Animals, for instance, are a big presence: they are characters which speak and transform. Time is also non-linear. At first I wanted to make a very Amazonian narrative, but I soon realised it would be incomprehensible to other audiences. I needed to fuse the two styles of storytelling. Anthropological fact became less important; dream and imagination became central to the narrative. I did find a way to tell the story in a purely Amazonian way too, but I had to hide it. That's something very clever viewers notice about the film – all of the symbolism of the animals and what's written on the rocks.



TG: So will people from different cultures perceive this film in different ways?

CG: I have been surprised by how deeply people have understood the film. For example, when we showed it in Korea people really understood it in a very spiritual way. And in India people told me they saw connections to the story of Krishna. I'm very interested in how these myths make us come together as humans, and in the coincidences in traditional myths across the world.

TG: Can you go into the mythology of the title?

CG: In Amazonian mythology, ancestral beings were brought to earth on a gigantic anaconda that descended from the Milky Way. They landed in the ocean and went into the Amazon, stopping at human communities along the way. They taught the humans a system of rules to live with the jungle, before returning to the Milky Way. The body of the anaconda became the river, and its shed skin became the waterfalls. Before leaving they left three gifts, including the sacred plant that allows you to communicate with them. When you use the plant you go on a spiritual journey: the serpent descends again and embraces you, taking you somewhere you can see the world in a different way. And I hope the film does that to the audience.

TG: Do you think we see indigenous cultures in a different way as a result of these journals?

CG: One hundred years ago we were in the middle of an industrial revolution and nature was the enemy. Indigenous people around the world were seen as poor souls, something subhuman that needed to be rescued. These explorers essentially told the Western world that we can learn from these people, and that was revolutionary. It was then, and still is, sadly.

MYSTIC RIVER
Embrace of the Serpent (opposite), directed by **Ciro Guerra** (above), is loosely based on the journals of a German ethnologist who ventured into the Amazon at the turn of the 20th century and an American biologist who followed in his footsteps 30 years later



But these journals did have a huge effect on the beginnings of the counterculture, which eventually became today's ecological movement. William Burroughs, for example, came to Colombia to find the sacred plant they wrote about. All the writers of the Beat generation were influenced by these journals. They helped make a big cultural shift: even thinking about an ecological conscience 100 years ago was completely ridiculous.

TG: Yet indigenous cultures are in greater danger than ever. Why is it important these cultures are preserved?

CG: We need to be aware that there is not just one way to be human. Everything we take for granted is as much of a tale, as much fiction and imagination, as what they take for granted. Take psychoanalysis: we disguise it as science and present it as facts. On the other hand, the way indigenous people understand time, for example, is very similar to the way particle physicists understand time. They don't see it as this linearity, they see it as simultaneous multiplicity. This way in which traditional knowledge and the most advanced science are coming together tells you there is something we used to know, and perhaps science is the process of trying to know it again. Patricio Guzmán makes this point in his film *The Pearl Button* (2015): indigenous people look at the stars and see their ancestors, and what are we looking for with our telescopes? We are trying to find out where we come from: we are looking for our ancestors.

TG: These cultures are still being extinguished though. Can cinema help preserve them?

CG: Yes, but people sometimes confuse film with fact, which of course it's not. That puts a big responsibility in the hands of the director. When you frame something with the camera you are selecting a bit of the truth, and it's the same when you edit. Objective truth is something that cannot be achieved through film, so people shouldn't look to films for scientific truth. The truth they tell us is different: they help us understand the spirit of a time, and the human condition.

TG: The film shows the meeting of two cultures: the Western and the indigenous. As a Colombian, where do you feel you fit within that framework?

CG: We Latin Americans are the result of this violent clash. We have this dual heritage, but the indigenous heritage is one we have denied. For me, this film was a personal process of rediscovering it and giving it value, because we have grown up in a culture that tells us that everything good comes from the United States and Europe. There are many people here who feel ashamed about our indigenous heritage, but I don't think it's a handicap – I think it's a blessing. In many ways, this is a film about the origin of Colombia.

TG: Have indigenous people seen the film? How did they respond to it?

CG: It was a wonderful experience. In Vaupés [in south-east Colombia] we managed to turn a *maloca*, a traditional longhouse, into a cinema for a night. We expected 500 people, and 2,000 came. Some walked for two days to see the film. For them, the most impressive part was to hear their languages spoken on screen. Many of them have cellphones, some of them have TV, but to see their cultures on film meant a great deal to them.

TG: In our culture, we've had time to develop a tolerance to the increasing realism of cinema. I thought it might have




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been powerful, even terrifying, for some of the indigenous people to be thrown in at the deep end with your film.

CG: I find virtual reality terrifying. When I first used it, I understood what people felt when they saw the Lumière's film of the train [in 1895]. But the indigenous people have a way to approach these new things in which they don't take anything seriously. I was thinking about this when we brought the actors [who played the young and old Karamakate] to Cannes and to the Oscars, but they just don't take those aspects of the Western world seriously. They know what's important in life, and the rest is just fun.

TG: The young and old Karamakate are absolutely integral to the film. How did you cast them?

CG: When we chose to shoot in Vaupés, we started going out in the region and inviting people to be a part of the film. One day the casting director went to a village and explained the project. Everyone was very enthusiastic and had their picture taken, apart from this one guy. Eventually his friends and family convinced him, but he said he would only do it if he could be the star of the film. And when we saw his picture we knew this was the young Karamakate. We didn't see anyone else quite like him: he's like an ancient warrior-shaman.

Then we had to find the older Karamakate. I spoke to many shamans, but they are just on a completely different wavelength. Asking them to be in the film would have been impossible. So I started looking at everything that has been shot in the Colombian Amazon over the years, which is very little. And I saw a short film done 25 years ago in Leticia [in the far south of Colombia] by the Ministry of Education. There was a guy in it for two minutes, and he was so impressive. I began asking around and tracked him down. The moment he opened the door I realised this film could be made. We started talking and his backstory was unbelievable because he is one of the last Ocaina people – there are only 16 of them left. During his childhood he was displaced by rubber exploitation as well. It was clear that it had to be him. 

 **Embrace of the Serpent** is released in UK cinemas on 10 June and is reviewed on page 75

THE MOUTH OF MADNESS
The idea that has dominated Western jungle narratives is that the jungle drives people mad, but *Embrace of the Serpent* (above) follows the beliefs of indigenous communities who think that the jungle simply releases the madness that lives in the hearts of men

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