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Embrace of the Serpent – A Tale of Metamorphosis

Sophia Stein · Friday, February 26th, 2016

Embrace of the Serpent is a film that does not serve up neat answers to an unfolding mystery, but inspires the participation of the viewer in navigating the twists and turns of two river journeys across time and down that great serpent mother, the Amazon River. The film is as arresting in its beauty, as it is wrenching in its depictions of colonial brutality.

Inspired by the journals of German explorer Theodor Koch-Grünberg and American biologist Richard Evans Schultes, the story interweaves Theo's imagined early 1900's encounter with a young shaman, Karamakate, with Evan's 1940's expedition in the company of that same shaman. Theo enlists the medicine man to save his life, in return for which he promises to lead Karamakate to a settlement, where he claims to have encountered survivors of the shaman's lineage, in a place ripe with the sacred yakruna plant. Some forty years later, seeking to recover the hallucinogen vine recounted in Theo's journals, Evan retraces the odyssey of his predecessors.

In the words of *Embrace of the Serpent* director Ciro Guerra, "It's not possible to replicate in any certain video or cinema the experience of the green of the Amazon." David Gallego's black-and-white cinematography strikingly breathes life into a time and place of photographic and journalistic memory. The unique structuring of the story crafted by Guerra and co-writer Jacques Toulemonde affects an indigenous concept of "time without time," "space without space," of multiple universes happening simultaneously.

"It's a film that has a dialogue with the audience and invites the viewer to dream, and to imagine, and to complete," Guerra observes. We are left to question how things have evolved over the span of forty years (or one-hundred-and-nine, if you consider the story up until the present day), to contemplate the complex relationship across time between the myriad Western explorers and colonizers and the indigenous peoples of the Amazon. International celebrities, Belgian Jan Bijvoet (Theo) and American Brionne Davis (Evan) are cast across from neophyte native players, Nilbio Torres (Young Karamakate), Antonio Bolívar Salvador (Old Karamakate), and Yauenkü Miguee (Manduca, Theo's guide), lending authenticity to the intercultural encounter.

It is no surprise that *Embrace of the Serpent***,** the third feature film from Colombian director Ciro Guerra scored an Academy-Award nomination for Best Foreign Language Film. What remains to be seen is if the film will take home the Oscar trophy on Sunday night. Regardless, I would encourage you to take the journey yourself, to see the film currently playing in theatres throughout the states.

Embrace of the Serpent premiered at the Director's Fortnight at 2015 Cannes Film Festival, where it won the CIACE Art Cinema Award. I had the pleasure of screening it for the first time at Sundance Film Festival earlier this year. At a party honoring director Richard Linklater (for the premiere of the documentary feature, *Richard Linklater – dream is destiny)*, I had the good fortune to meet up with actor Brionne Davis, who plays Evan, in *Embrace of the Serpent*. Brionne

generously took time to talk with me at length about his unique insights, amazing adventures, and personal metamorphosis during the making of the film, *Embrace of the Serpent*.

Nilbio Torres (Young Karamakate), "Embrace of the Serpent."
Photo by Andres Córdoba, courtesy of Oscilloscope Laboratories.

Sophia Stein: About "Embrace of the Serpent," you have commented that "The philosophy of this film is everything that I stand for in this life. To watch how I got to play this role and have this experience is a testament to what my life is supposed to mean." I would like to hear that story. The story of how you got to play this role?

Brionne Davis: It began when I was growing up as a kid in the Ozarks, where I learned how to row boats and paddle canoes. I used to teach canoeing in Boy Scouts up there in the summer. So it really began there. The Amazon was the same experience, but on a higher dosage of "caapi," I guess you would say.

caapi: Creeping vine of great hallucinogen power. Its preparation includes mixtures of other plants for greater effect.

Sophia: How were you introduced to Ciro Guerra and the film project?

Brionne: I had made another film, called *Avenged*, about two years prior to *Embrace of the Serpent*. One of the producers in charge of casting *Embrace of the Serpent*, reached out to one of the producers from that film to ask, "Who are actors that you could trust to play this role, who could handle the extremities of the Amazon?" I was one of I don't know how many actors that he might have suggested — but I also was very similar to Richard Evans Schultes, [the ethnobotanist that was the source of inspiration for the character].

Sophia: Did you audition for the film?

Brionne: I met Ciro on Skype. After I'd watched his films, we had a Skype interview. I'd already started working on the character, doing research on Richard. Ciro could see my passion and what I was willing to do for the role. He gave me some instructions and had me do a little video of myself walking through the woods here in LA. After that, it just all came together.

You know, I am very grateful that I did not have to audition for the role. With many parts, and particularly a role like this one, it takes time to blend yourself with the character. To look at the character from an outside perspective, to recognize similarities that you have, to really find that character inside of you, and to elevate those qualities. I believe that inside all of us, is everyone.

Certainly, learning the languages took time. It took me two weeks when I got down there, working with Antonio, meeting with the indigenous people and hearing them speak; ten hours a day, I was writing out the language so that it would just be in my system, and I wouldn't have to think about it. It was over and over and over again. Jan had been there two weeks prior, and I asked him, "Is there a trick?" He just said, "Repetition." I was hoping that it would be something easier than that, but it wasn't.

Sophia: Antonio, who played the elder shaman, Karamakate, he was not a professional actor?

Brionne: Antonio had acted in a short film about twenty years ago. Ciro was doing research, looking for someone to play the Old Karamakate, and he came across a video of the short film. They pursued him. Antonio had had a bad experience shooting that film and never wanted to act in a film again.

Sophia: What had happened on the short film that left such a bad taste in Antonio's mouth?

Brionne: I don't know. I could probably assume a great many things — because I probably have had those experiences myself. As Old Karamakate, he says in the film, "Ants like money. I don't. It tastes bad." So I imagine that it was an experience like that.

Antonio and I had a very interesting relationship. He didn't speak English, and I didn't speak Spanish. We communicated through charades and me with my Spanish book.
Yauenkü Miguee, the gentleman who played Manduca, the traveling companion of Theo, is a school teacher who had done some theatre. Every one of the other indigenous characters and extras, were from that community.
Nilbio [Torres, who plays Young Karamakate] is a farmer. His family had agreed to be extras, and were pressuring him to do the film. "No. I'm not gonna do it, I'm not gonna do it." Finally, they pressured him enough, and he agreed upon one condition: "O.k. – But, if, I'm going to do it, I'm going to be the *star* of the film. I'm not going to be an *extra*!"

Yauenkü Miguee (Manduca), Jan Bijvoet (Theo), and Nilbio Torres (Young Karamakate), "Embrace of the Serpent." Photo by Andres Córdoba, courtesy of Oscilloscope Laboratories.

I think that the way that this impossibility, which is the film, became possible, was by my willingness to let go once I arrived in the Amazon. On one of my first nights there, a big moth landed on my shoulder, then flew around and landed on my foot. Andrés Barrientos, who was the acting coach on set, working with the extras and with Antonio and Nilbio, primarily, observed that whenever a butterfly or moth lands on you, it means that you're going to go through a metamorphosis or a change in your life. In that moment, I just let go and opened myself up to whatever I was about to experience. Because, you know, I had seen Ciro's previous films and I had communicated with him on Skype, but I had never met Ciro or anyone working on the film. I knew in that moment that I was in as safe a place as I could be, and it was going to behoove me to let go.
Later, when we were in the last week of shooting, this grouping of butterflies appears on the shoreline. Ciro clears the set and says, "Evan, can you start there and walk to the butterflies, and when you get to the butterflies, stop." And they flew up around me, and I could feel thousands of butterflies. I get teared up every time I think of it and the Amazon. I didn't want to move because I didn't want that moment in my life to be over.
The concept of compassion for other cultures, of not pushing your viewpoint onto theirs but actually learning from one another has been something that I have always considered to be incredibly valuable. The concept of letting go, and letting the universe work in your favor are all components of this film's storyline.
Sophia: You had mentioned your belief that we have the pieces of every character within ourselves and that, in your understanding of it, acting is a matter of discovering where you and a particular character intersect to foreground those qualities. In what ways did you feel close to Richard Evans Schultes naturally? Did you share his passions? Which aspects of his character were more of a stretch for you?
Brionne: Early on in his life, Richard developed this passion for plants. Early on in my life, I developed a passion for exploration and storytelling. I began acting when I was nine.
When he went into the Amazon, Richard discovered these people and fell in love with them. Richard would see a plant one hundred yards away, that he would identify as a plant that had never been named. He would come back to it two years later.
In the beginning of the film, you'll see me following Karamakate through the Amazon, I stop to look at a plant and make a note of its location. At some point, I am going to come back, but I can't deal with it right now, I've got to follow Karamakate.
The film is inspired by the journals of Richard Evans Schultes. The most complicated part for me was understanding where my character was at this point in time. He had already mastered these languages, but he was still discovering so much about the Amazon. It wasn't until the second

week, on the second day of shooting, where Ciro and I together found the rock in which my character, Evan, was going to be braced. There was just something that happened.

I had been there for two weeks, practicing the languages, training, observing as Brionne, and I was seeing a lot of humor in some of the situations. On the second day of shooting, I was giving Ciro options, and I could tell that he wanted something else; although, he couldn't put his finger on it.

That night — this is crazy – I had fallen asleep, and I hear this chant. I hear this, "Hun-nuh, hun-nuh. Hun-nuh, hun-nuh." I open my eyes, I look above me, and leaning over me is this figure of a shaman spirit, amber-toned, and it's chanting. It stops, recognizing the fact that I've woken up. It rises up and looks at me. I'm against the wall in my bed, just staring at this figure. I get up. I move to the back corner of the room, and I see this figure across from me. He moves to the edge of the bed, he turns and looks at me one more time, and there is this feeling of peace. I can't see his face, but this feeling of this body that's just at peace, and he walks out and just dissolves into the darkness.

I follow him out. I turn on all the lights, but he's gone. I'm looking in the closet, under the bed. I'm looking everywhere. I am kind of freaked out. I sit on the edge of my bed, and this peace comes over me. I realized later that I had just been welcomed. I had just been blessed.

The next day, there was this feeling of discovery. Sometimes as an actor, you get in this ZOOM place where the whole world just kind of shuts out, and you're so living in that moment, it's just like, ZOOM, another world. I had finished a scene. The next thing I know, Ciro is coming down, smiling. He's hugging me, and he goes, "That's him. We just found him."

In that moment, we both understood that there needed to be a difference between the explorer, Theo (played by Jan), and the explorer, Evan. Evan was more an observer, more brooding, in a way. That was the rock that Ciro wanted him to be.

Sophia: I was actually going to ask if you and Jan set about trying to make your characters similar, because Karamakate considers you to be one person, but I understand now that you intentionally set out to differentiate them.

Brionne: The two scientists are similar in the exploration, the desire for knowledge, the desire to share the story, but they are two different people in their approaches to that process.

Sophia: The person who was chanting over you that night, was that somebody involved with the shoot or was that someone else?

Brionne: That was a spirit. That was a spirit.

Sophia: Do you think it was a dream? Or a hallucination?

Brionne: If it was a dream or a hallucination, then it was real to me. It was as physical as if you and I were to sit across from each other.

I don't think that you can go to the Amazon without feeling that intense spirituality that exists there. It's joy and sadness and life and death, so tightly wound. There is such a tight balance of opposites, the yin and the yang, that, unless you're completely closed off, you can't avoid feeling some sort of spiritual connection to other dimensions.

Nilbio Torres (Young Karamakate), "Embrace of the Serpent."
Photo by Liliana Merizalde, courtesy of Oscilloscope Laboratories.

Sophia: In the credits of the film, Guerra offers "Thanks to the Spirit of the Amazon." I read that he had asked a shaman to speak to the jungle and ask for protection for the crew in a private ritual before the start of the shoot. Were there times that you could recall feeling gratitude for that protection?

Brionne: Flying in, I knew that either this was going to be my last film ever – you know, I would fall off a cliff or get bitten by something, but it was worth the risk to me — or it was going to be

the most amazing time of my life up until that point. Certainly, it turned out to be the latter.
On a personal level, there were moments where I would be in the canoe by myself and the film crew was in a rowboat a hundred yards away, I could see them in the distance, but it felt like I was just in the middle of the Amazon river by myself. If I turned away and didn't look at them, I could be out there as completely alone as anyone possibly could. In moments like that, I just thought, everything in my whole life makes sense right now. It was all leading me up to being right here in this time, right now.
Gratitude in that, if it rained, it would rain when we were breaking for lunch or we were done shooting. Sometimes we would have to move schedules around a little bit, but then we would find other opportunities – like the butterfly scene. We caught those butterflies because we couldn't shoot at another location, and that was the final scene.
Watching how passionate the crew was. It couldn't have been possible without each and every single one of those people. Catherine Rodriguez was dealing with wardrobe, and she was right there with me at all times. We would get back at eleven o'clock at night, for a six am turn-around, and the next morning, my wardrobe would be cleaned and dried and ready to go. Every single person on that crew was so committed. We were guided by the community, as well – the drivers and boats that knew the rivers really, really well.
But I want to send a huge shout-out to director Ciro Guerra. He's a phenomenal filmmaker –because he listens, he observes, and he staffs himself with incredibly talented people, allowing them to bring their experience to the project. He is a phenomenal human being, and I value him beyond what words can express.

Director Ciro Guerra, "Embrace of the Serpent."
Photo courtesy of Oscilloscope Laboratories.

Sophia: Guerra admitted that the journey was "only slightly less treacherous than for your forbearers." I would imagine that there were times that you all must have felt vulnerable, fearful, or out of your element?
Brionne: First of all, the experience of the crew was far more difficult than mine because they had to handle so many different elements — you know, I only had to take care of myself.
One of the hardest days for me, it was very hot, and we were shooting a lot of the river stuff. You had to position the canoe and the camera boat so that the background scenery was appropriate, the dialogue had to be in sync between me and Antonio, and the river was having its way. They had to keep the motor running in order to get the shot, and the fumes from the gas were coming up in my face. So I tied a scarf around my face so that I wasn't breathing the fumes. The last week of shooting, I was exhausted, thinking, it's really, really hot in the middle of this river, and my feet are soaking wet, and my shoulders are aching from rowing. I was out there for eight weeks, and generally, I don't remember the hardships, which pale in comparison to the amazing things that happened. I was always fighting that balance between completely surrendering and taking in each moment — you don't want it to be over, you want to be fully there for that experience — but the other part of you just wants to be back home, with a warm shower, safe in your own bed.
Sophia: The film is about this hunt for this sacred plant, the hallucinogen vine, yakruna. Did you avail yourself of the opportunity to try it?
Brionne: Yakruna is actually a metaphorical plant. It represents a kind of ayahuasca. Ayahuasca is a meditative, hallucinogenic process that people go through for healing addictions, to seek out their purpose, things like that. You have to be led by a shaman. I think they even do it in Long Beach, but a good place to do it is Colombia or Peru, in South America. They took artistic license with quite a few things in the film out of deference to the sacredness of the processes of the

Amazon.

I did not try it because I had to protect myself. I had to really take, really good care of myself while I was there. There is something in the film, however, called mambe, which is a mixture of coca leaves and ash. I actually tried that. If you remember, Karamakate can't remember how to make mambe, and my character, Evan, prepares it for him. Mambe is an ancient recipe. For thousands of years, they have considered coca leaves as sacred, a gift from the Gods. Mambe creates this numbing in your jaw, and then this incredible focus. It's caffeine, but almost a superior type of caffeine. It doesn't alter you at all, but it just makes everything sharper. It staves off hunger, it increases your metabolism, colors are sharper, and your vision is clearer. They sell it there, if you can get it.

It is unfortunate that cocaine has been deemed corrupt. If you do enough research, you realize that coca leaf is actually a very beneficial herbal remedy. The problem with drugs is that once you pour gasoline inside coca leaf, you're gonna get something that is not good for you. You can call something a drug or you can call something herbal. If it's herbal and pure, and it serves a purpose, then it's not bad. It's just how we use it and abuse herbs and bastardize them.

Sophia: In the film, Karamakate speaks about "chullachaqui" (pronounced chu-lah-cha'-key), the mythological figure of the Amazon. The hollow, empty copy of a human being who roams the jungle waiting to find someone to deceive. The myth recounts that every human being in the world has a chullachaqui, who is exactly like them in appearance, but completely hollow inside. I was curious about your take on that myth, which is echoed throughout the film.

Brionne: I think it's a beautiful metaphor that relates to avatars on Facebook today, from where our image is floated around the world.

Young Karamakate protests: So you've taken my picture. You've taken me and said, "This is what I am." There is just an image, with no substance. It floats around but has nothing underneath it; there is no depth. That's not what I am. I am this person that is multi-dimensional.

If you equate "chullachaqui" to our social media world, who I am on social media is just the good stuff. Of course I am having the time of my life, right now; it's a lot of fun. People see that, and they don't know that I'm struggling with other things. So they equate your "chullachaqui" with your identify. This surface thing that represents you, that is not you.

I feel like a lot of people in the world, are just the surface of who they are. But a lot of people are either in denial of their true, authentic selves, or they don't want to face themselves or see themselves. That's a "chullachaqui," as well.

Sophia: I also wanted to ask you about Karamakate's dream —

Brionne: When Karamakate is drawing on the wall, and I ask him, "What is it?" He says, "I don't remember." Well, I'm looking at it, connecting these dots. I think this looks like something that I've seen in Theo's book. That's where the yakruna is, so we just have to go there.

If you look closely at those figures (and this is what's crazy), that artwork is later depicted in color when I'm going through the yakruna experience. That is what Old Karamakate has been drawing on that wall. In that process, it's all becoming clear to me. It is all making sense.

You'll notice in one of the drawings, the man inside the butterfly at the center. Later, when I am having the dream, the very last color image, is a man inside a butterfly. Then the last scene of the film, is me being surrounded by the butterflies.

Sophia: The title of the film, Embrace of the Serpent – how do you interpret its meaning?

Brionne: Serpent is the river, and the river is what gives life. The serpent gave life to the people of Colombia. They say, we came out of the belly of the serpent. Which basically means, we evolved from the water over time. The serpent is the mother which gives us life, gives us food, gives us transportation.

So if you look at the Young Karamakate journey with Theo, Theo doesn't obey the laws, and he becomes sick. His archetype is the jaguar. When Theo dies, you see the jaguar snap and eat the serpent. Instead of allowing the serpent to guide him to trust, ultimately, in the universe, he dies.
Later, Karamakate advises to me, "You'll see the serpent. And when you see the serpent, you must allow it to embrace you. You will be afraid, but you have to allow it to be." It makes me cry every time because if you think of your life … [clears his tears], the more we exist in fear, the more we exist in saying "no" and not opening ourselves up to what the universe (or God, or whatever you want to call it), works in our favor, the more we die inside, and the more we prevent ourselves from our true purpose. When he says to me, "You're gonna be afraid, but you have to allow it to embrace you," in that moment, I enter into the experience.
Those are the things that reach you in the other sense. You can't put your finger on it until you've seen it – until you've been in the movie, seen it six times, and read the script — you can then, I think, communicate it verbally.
Sophia: It is the kind of film that I feel like I want to see six times. While it depicts brutality, it was so calming, in a way. The sense of time, the beauty of the place, the cinematography, of the people, it just drew me in. It's seductive. And it is arresting. After watching the film, I just wanted to watch it again. It's a big film that is going to speak across time. I felt as if I had been immersed in another place and time completely.
Brionne: There is a meditative quality to it. I saw it for the first time at Cannes. I was looking around at people, pointing at the screening going: "I'm in this? I am in this film! I got to be in this film?!" I mean it might be my favorite film of all time, even if I wasn't in it.
Top Image: Jan Bijvoet (Theo) surrounded by indigenous people of Vaupés, Colombia, "Embrace of the Serpent." Photo by Andres Córdoba, courtesy of Oscilloscope Laboratories.

Embrace of the Serpent — Official Website

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