EMBRACE OF THE SERPENT

Directed by CIRO GUERRA
Written by CIRO GUERRA and JACQUES TOULEMONDE
Produced by CRISTINA GALLEGO
Starring JAN BIJVOET, BRIONNE DAVIS, ANTONIO BOLÍVAR SALVADOR, NILBIO TORRES, and YAUKHEN KÜ MIGUEE

Academy Award® Nominee – Best Foreign Language Film – Colombia

Awards and Festivals
2015 Cannes Film Festival – Directors’ Fortnight – Winner – CIACE Art Cinema Award
2015 Toronto International Film Festival – Official Selection
2015 AFI FEST – Official Selection
2015 Mar Del Plata International Film Festival – Winner – Golden Astor
2015 Macondo Awards (Colombian Academy Awards) – Winner – 8 Awards including Best Film
2016 Film Independent Spirit Awards – Nominee – Best International Film
2016 Sundance Film Festival – Official Selection; 2016 Berlinale Film Festival

Run Time: 125 minutes  In Cinemas June 10th

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SYNOPSIS

At once blistering and poetic, the ravages of colonialism cast a dark shadow over the South American landscape in EMBRACE OF THE SERPENT, the third feature by Ciro Guerra. Filmed in stunning black-and-white, SERPENT centers on Karamakate, an Amazonian shaman and the last survivor of his people, and the two scientists who, over the course of 40 years, build a friendship with him. The film was inspired by the real-life journals of two explorers (Theodor Koch-Grünberg and Richard Evans Schultes) who traveled through the Colombian Amazon during the last century in search of the sacred and difficult-to-find psychedelic Yakruna plant.

DIRECTOR’S STATEMENT

Whenever I looked at a map of my country, I was overwhelmed by great uncertainty. Half of it was an unknown territory, a green sea, of which I knew nothing. The Amazon, that unfathomable land, which we foolishly reduce to simple concepts. Coke, drugs, Indians, rivers, war.

Is there really nothing more out there? Is there not a culture, a history? Is there not a soul that transcends?

The explorers taught me otherwise.

Those men who left everything, who risked everything, to tell us about a world we could not imagine. Those who made first contact, during one of the most vicious holocausts man has ever seen. Can man, through science and art, transcend brutality? Some men did.

The explorers have told their story. The natives haven’t.

This is it. A land the size of a whole continent, yet untold. Unseen by our own cinema.

That Amazon is lost now. In the cinema, it can live again.

—CIRO GUERRA
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.

If this is the case, I can only apologize and ask for your understanding, for the display I witnessed in those enchanted hours was such, that I find it impossible to describe in a language that allows others to understand its beauty and splendor; 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.

—THEODOR KOCH-GRÜNBERG, 1907

Many years after Koch-Grünberg’s diary entry, filmmaker Ciro Guerra and his crew have become explorers of another kind, ones who carried their cameras deep into the jungle to rediscover part of that unknown Amazonia. EMBRACE OF THE SERPENT, filmed during the course of seven weeks in the jungles of Vaupés, is the first fiction feature to be shot in the Colombian Amazon in more than 30 years. It is also the first Colombian film to feature an indigenous protagonist and to be told from his perspective.

But beyond Amazonia—which covers several states of the country and way beyond its frontiers, and is the refuge of hundreds of native communities, their customs and languages, many of which are now lost—this is
also a story about friendship, loyalty, and betrayal. It is told with the valuable help of international stars Jan Bijvoet (BORGMAN) and Brionne Davis, as well as the natives Antonio Bolívar Salvador, Nilbio Torres, and Yauenkü Miguée, as well as dozens of representatives of the different tribes that dwell in this faraway land, so unknown to most Colombians and so coveted by foreigners. The crew’s purpose was to approach the native communities and establish a relationship of mutual knowledge and respect, being transparent in every negotiation and always remembering that this is their land.

The screenplay was mostly written by Ciro Guerra during the course of four years, with co-writer Jacques Toulemonde coming on board for the final drafts, helping to shape a non-western tale for audiences used to western storytelling. It’s worth noting that, of the very few films that have been shot in the Amazon, almost all of them are told from the explorer’s point of view, and Amazon natives are often seen as primitive savages.

This was a multiracial, multicultural, multilingual set: apart from the Belgian and U.S. protagonists, the crew included people from Peru, Venezuela, México, and Colombians from Bogotá, Cali, Santa Marta, and Boyacá, as well as natives from the Ocaina, Huitoto, Tikuna, Cubeo, Yurutí, Tukano, Siriano, Karapano, and Desano tribes, all of them native of Vaupés.

The exuberant landscape of the Colombian Amazon was both surprising and intimidating for the crew. The chosen location is part of an unknown, unseen Amazon, the same place where the explorers whose diaries inspired the story (Koch-Grünberg and Schultes) found a great human and cultural richness.

Besides all the support from the indigenous communities, as well as members of the Civil Defense and a nurse, the crew had the special protection of a “payé,” a shaman of the local tribes, who joined them and did all types of ceremonies to ask for the help of the jungle in keeping them safe from disease, animals, and bad weather.

AN INTERVIEW WITH CIRO GUERRA

This production imposed challenges for its director that probably no other film of his will ever match. There were many moments in which it seemed giving up was the only option, not only due to the difficulties of financing and making the film, but also while facing the mystery that he encountered as he went deeper into the Amazon jungle.

“As we finished the first week of shooting, a deep concern came over me,” Guerra wrote in a journal, not unlike the ones of the explorers whose stories inspired the film. “The complications were too great, the schedule was too tight. It became clear, crystal clear, that finishing this movie was impossible. We had dreamt too big, we had aimed too far. We had been sinfully optimistic, and the gods and the jungle were about to
punish us. With this clarity, like the sailor who is the first to notice that the vessel is sinking, I sat down and prepared for the inevitable. But then, what I witnessed was how a miracle came into being.”

**Where does this story come from?**

It came from a personal interest in learning about the world of the Colombian Amazon, which is half the country, and yet it remains hidden and unknown, even though I’ve lived in Colombia all my life.

I feel that we’ve turned our backs on this knowledge and this way of understanding the world. It’s so underestimated, and yet so fundamental. But when you start to study and research it, you do it through the eyes of the explorers, who are always European or North American. They were the ones who came and gave us news about our own country.

I wanted to tell a story about these encounters, but from a new perspective, in which the protagonist wasn’t the white man as usual, but the native. This changes the entire perspective and renews it. We wanted to be able to tell this story in a way that was true to their experience, yet was relatable to any other person on the planet.

**The story is told in two different times, based on the diaries of two explorers who never met. How was the process of writing and how did you find the narrative thread to tell this story?**

There’s an idea in many of the texts that explore the indigenous world that speaks of a different concept of time. Time to them is not a line, as we see it in the West, but a series of multiple universes happening simultaneously. It is a concept that has been referred to as “time without time” or “space without space.”

I thought it connected with the stories of the explorers, who wrote about how one of them came to the Amazon following the footsteps of another explorer before him, and when he would encounter the same indigenous tribe, he would find that the previous explorer had been turned into myth. To the natives, it was always the same man, the same spirit, visiting them over and over again. This idea of a single life, a single experience, lived through the bodies of several men, was fascinating to me, and I thought it would make a great starting point for the script. It gave us a perspective of the indigenous way of thinking, but also connected with the viewer who could understand these men who come from our world, and through them, we could slowly begin to see the vision of the world of Karamakate.

**With all that’s happened, how do you feel about the relationship with the native communities and how did they react to the production?**

The native communities were very open and immensely helpful. Amazonian people are very warm, funny,
with a lot of heart. They are obviously careful at the beginning, while they figure out what your true intentions are, because for a long time people who have come do so in order to pillage and hurt. But once they realize that you’re not a threat, they are very enthusiastic and we were very happy to work together with them.

What we are doing is rescuing the memory of an Amazon that no longer exists—that is not what it was before. Hopefully this film will create this image in the collective memory, because characters like Karamakate—this breed of wise, warrior-shamans—are now extinct. The modern native is something else, there is much knowledge that still remains, but most of it is now lost, many cultures, languages. This knowledge has been passed on through oral tradition, it’s never been written, and from my personal experience, trying to approach it was kind of humiliating, because it is not something you can aspire to understand in a short time like you do in school or college. It is related to life, generations, natural cycles; it really is a gigantic wall of knowledge that you can only admire and maybe try to scratch its surface.

The only way to learn it is by living it, and living it for many, many years. We can only hope that this film sparks some curiosity in the viewers: a desire to learn, respect, and protect this knowledge which I think is invaluable for the modern world.

It is not a matter of folklore or ancient cultures but of a wisdom that has answers to many of the questions that people today have: from how to achieve balance with nature, making the best use of its resources without ravaging them, and looking for harmony not only between man and nature, but between all the different ways of being human that exist. Reaching this equilibrium is a way to achieve happiness—a type of happiness that the current political and social systems are not capable of offering.

**Has this process of research and knowledge of these cultures changed your perception of the world in any way?**

In every way. I am a different person now than when this process started. I think all of us who made this movie feel the same way. You learn to swim in this gigantic flow and everyday it brings new things, new visions. We saw how everything has knowledge, from the rock to the tree, the insect or the wind, and we learned to find happiness in that. It’s a change in perspective.

It’s difficult for us, having been born and raised in the capitalist system, to change our lives. But we approached another form of existing, and it’s comforting to know that there’s not just one way to be human. Discovering the beauty in the other, and learning and respecting that, is still important.

**The "Colour Sequence"**

A visual representation of the iconography of the Barasana tribe, the primitive drawings are representative of the childlike state and can only be accessed through the dreamworld therefore this scene invites the audience into a realm that merges past, present and future. I did not want this sequence to be a special effects show but to bring to light the spiritual realm experienced by the Barasana people.
ABOUT THE FILMMAKER

CIRO GUERRA was born on Río de Oro (Cesar, Colombia) in 1981 and studied film and television at the National University of Colombia. At the age of 21, after directing four multi-award-winning short films, he wrote and directed LA SOMBRA DEL CAMINANTE (THE WANDERING SHADOWS), his feature directorial debut, which won awards at the San Sebastian, Toulouse, Mar de Plata, Trieste, Havana, Quito, Cartagena, Santiago, and Warsaw film festivals, and was selected for 60 more, including Tribeca, Locarno, Seoul, Pesaro, Seattle, Hamburg, Kolkata, Rio de Janeiro, Istanbul, and Guadalajara.

His second feature film, LOS VIAJES DEL VIENTO (THE WIND JOURNEYS), was part of the Official Selection – Un Certain Regard of the Cannes Film Festival in 2009. It was released in 17 countries and selected by 90 festivals, including Toronto, Rotterdam, San Sebastián, Hong Kong, Jerusalem, and London, receiving different awards in Cannes, Santa Bárbara, Málaga, Santiago, Bogotá, and Cartagena. It was recently selected in a national critic’s poll as one of the 10 most important Colombian films.

All of Guerra’s feature films to date have been chosen to represent Colombia in the Academy Awards®.

ABOUT THE PRODUCERS

CRISTINA GALLEGO was born in Bogotá in 1978 and graduated from Film & TV School at the National University of Colombia and from Advertising and Merchandising at the Politécnico Grancolombiano. In the production area, she has participated in the training workshops of Film Business School 2010, ACE Mundus 2012 (Atelier du Cinéma Européen).

In 2001, together with Ciro Guerra and Diana Bustamante, she founded Ciudad Lunar, the company which produced the feature films LA SOMBRA DEL CAMINANTE (THE WANDERING SHADOWS) in 2004 (winner of 15 international film awards) and LOS VIAJES DEL VIENTO (THE WIND JOURNEYS) in 2009, which was selected for the Cannes Film Festival. They were co-produced with Argentina, Holland, and Germany, and supported by Ibermedia, Berlinale’s World Cinema Fund, Cannes Cinefondation, and Rotterdam’s Hubert Bals Fund. Both films were directed by Ciro Guerra. Her third feature film, EDIFICIO ROYAL (BUILDING ROYAL), directed by Iván Wild, was selected for the Biarritz, Viña del Mar, Miami, La Habana, Lima, Aruba, and Cartagena film festivals.

Gallego is also coproducer of CECILIA (2012), directed by Verónica Rodríguez, and the documentary film EL VIAJE DEL ACORDÉON, (THE ACCORDION’S JOURNEY), directed by Andrew Tucker and Rey Sagbin, which won the Audience Award at the 2013 Cartagena Film Festival. She’s currently developing PÁJAROS DE VERANO (BIRDS OF PASSAGE), which will be directed by Ciro Guerra in 2017, and co-producing the film DEMONIOS TUS OJOS (SISTER OF MINE), directed by the Spanish director Pedro Aguilera, whose previous film, LA INFLUENCIA, was selected for the Directors’ Fortnight of the 2007 Cannes Film Festival. All of her films have been made through co-production. Her partners include Cine Sud Promotion (Fr), Razor Films (Ge), Aurora (Ge), Volya Films (Ne), NorteSur (Ve) and CineOjo (Ar). Nationally, her projects have been supported with private funding from the two most important TV channels in Colombia: Caracol and RCN.
Gallego is a member of the Colombian Film Academy, representative of the producers in the Cinema Guild, and a member of the Association of Producers ACE Network (Ateliers du Cinema Européen).

**ABOUT THE CAST**

**JAN BIJVOET (THEO)** was born in Antwerp in 1966. He has been one of the artistic directors and actors of the Antarctica Theater since 2005. He has also performed in film and television, guest-starring in a number of series. He has starred in the films AD FUNDUM, THE BROKEN CIRCLE BREAKDOWN (Academy® Award nominee), and BORGMAN (Official Selection – Competition, Cannes 2013). In 2007, he was nominated for the Flemish Culture Award of Scenic Arts. Referring to the German explorer who was the inspiration for his character, he reflects that even though Grünberg tried to integrate with the native people, he could not let go of his white spirit. “He had the western way of thinking, and he wanted to carry hundreds of things to study. Love is possession, too. He is also afraid of death. He doesn’t understand why, but it’s because deep down, he is a materialist since his formation, even though he tries to drift away from it.”

**BRIONNE DAVIS (EVAN)** was born in Texas and started acting at a very early age, playing Tom Sawyer. He has starred and taken leading roles in more than 30 independent feature length and short films and television series, including REST STOP: DON’T LOOK BACK (2008), DOROTHY AND THE WITCHES OF OZ (2012), Pandemic (2007), NARCISSIST (2014), SAVAGED (2013), and HOLIDAYS WITH HEATHER (2006). In New York, Brionne starred in the Theatre Row adaptation of Sam Shepard’s “True West.” He has appeared in many theater productions all across the country, including “Wallenburg” at the Soho Playhouse, “A Noble Exile” in Los Angeles and “Nueva York,” a one-man show that he wrote and produced, inspired by the writings of Tennessee Williams. Davis’ character “Evan” in EMBRACE OF THE SERPENT was inspired by the great botanist and explorer Richard Evans Schultes, and he feels close to him in his love of and search for plants and nature.

**ANTONIO BOLÍVAR SALVADOR (OLD KARAMAKATE)** is one of the last survivors of the Ocaina people. He resides near Leticia and has had some previous experiences in filmmaking, but he prefers not to speak about them because he feels that they were disrespectful to his culture. Besides playing one of the main characters, he also served as interpreter for the Tikuna, Cubeo, Huitoto languages and even English, as he became the teacher of the international actors. He represents the best of the Amazonian people: willing to trust foreigners, to transmit their knowledge and thankful to be treated respectfully. That’s the most important aspect of the film to him: “It is a film that shows the Amazon, the lungs of the world, the greater purifying filter and the most valuable of indigenous cultures. That is its greatest achievement.”

**NILBIO TORRES (YOUNG KARAMAKATE)** has never set foot in a gym; his amazing physique has been sculpted by the hardships of the jungle and the hard work he’s done since he was little. The 30-year-old has only worked in agriculture and this is his first experience with the cinema. He has a hard time expressing himself in Spanish, as he speaks mostly Cubeo. But he manages to find words to tell what this experience has meant to him. He feels the film is faithful to the story of his ancestors. “What Ciro is doing with this film is an homage to
the memory of our elders, in the time before: the way the white men treated the natives, the rubber exploitation. I’ve asked the elders how it was and it is as seen in the film, that’s why we decided to support it. For the elders and myself it is a memory of the ancestors and their knowledge.”

YAUENKÜ MIGUEE (MANDUCA) was born and raised in Nazareth, a Tikuna community of the Amazon, 26 years ago. He is now a student of physical education in Bogotá and is about to achieve his greatest goal: to become a professional. He defines his participation in the film as a new experience in his life, this time from the field of art and corporal expression, which reinforced his thinking and showed him how to see life from different perspectives. He believes this film should be shared not only with the people of the locations, but all across the country, with all the indigenous peoples in Leticia and the Amazon, with the leaders, in schools and universities. He is the voice of many Manducas, a voice that, far away from the so-called civilization, cries out for a more civilized attitude towards Colombia’s indigenous communities.

Top image from the Theodore Koch-Grünberg’s 1903 expedition which is recreated for the film in the image below.
AMAZONIAN GLOSSARY

YUMPARI: Cohiuano salute. Its translation is “present.”

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

CABOCLO: Name given to "acculturated" natives who work for the whites. The literal translation of the word is "traitor."

CAUCHERO: Name given to settlers dedicated to the exploitation of Amazonian rubber.

CHIRICASPI: Medicinal and hallucinogen plant, occasionally used by the shamans and payés of the Amazon.

CHORREA: Rubber collection center in the Colombian Amazon. Ceded by the Colombian government to rubber barons in the early twentieth century, it was the place where some of the most heinous crimes committed by the caucheros against the Indians took place. It served intermittently as a Capuchin mission and as a military barrack during the war with Peru, and was later abandoned for decades. Today it is a center for the memory of the Rubber Holocaust.

CHULLACHAQUI: Mythological figure of the Amazon. Hollow, empty copy of a human being who roams the jungle waiting to find someone to deceive. Every human being in the world has a chullachaqui, who is exactly like them in appearance, but completely hollow inside.

COCA: Sacred plant of the indigenous natives of South and Central America. Valued since ancient times for its ability to alleviate hunger and fatigue, as well as its spiritual properties.

COHIUANO: Extinct Amazonian tribe, exterminated by the rubber barons. KASCHIRI: Fermented mandioca liquor. MALOCA: Large communal longhouse, traditional for Amazonian communities.

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AMBE: Mixture of coca leaves, minced to a fine powder, and ashes of leaves of yarumo, a plant that activates and empowers the energetic and nutritional properties of the coca leaf.

PAYÉ: Spiritual guide and religious leader of Amazonian communities, keeper of ancestral tradition, scientist and medicine man expert in plants.

SIRINGUERO: Name given to natives and mestizos enslaved by rubber barons, forced to work in the rubber plantations, bleeding trees in subhuman conditions throughout their whole lives.

VIRAKOCHA: Indigenous deity of great power. Some Amazonian communities used this name to refer to European invaders.

VIROLA: Jungle bush whose cortex is rich in hallucinogenic alkaloids. Frequently used as a mixture with caapi to produce visions of the spiritual world.

YAKRUNA: Hallucinogen vine, epiphyte of the rubber tree. The sap of trees on which it grows is of higher purity.

YARUMO: Large tree whose leaves posses medicinal properties.
CREDITS – CAST AND CREW

YOUNG KARAMAKATE played by NILBIO TORRES

OLD KARAMAKATE played by ANTONIO BOLÍVAR SALVADOR

THEO played by JAN BIJVOET

EVAN played by BRIONNE DAVIS

MANDUCA played by YAUENKÚ MIGUEE

A Production of Ciudad Lunar (Colombia), in coproduction with NorteSur (Venezuela), MC Producciones (Argentina), Buffalo Films (Argentina) in association with Caracol Televisión and Dago García Producciones, with the support of FDC, INCAA, CNAC, Ibermedia and Hubert Bals

DIRECTED by CIRO GUERRA
PRODUCED by CRISTINA GALLEGO
SCREENPLAY: CIRO GUERRA and JACQUES TOULEMONDE
EXECUTIVE PRODUCTION: CRISTINA GALLEGO, RAÚL BRAVO, MARCELO CESPEDES, and HORACIO MENTASTI
DIRECTION OF PHOTOGRAPHY: DAVID GALLEGOS

PRODUCTION DESIGN
ANGÉLICA PEREA

ART DIRECTION
RAMSES BENJUMEA

SOUND
MARCO SALAVARRIA

SOUND DESIGN
CARLOS GARCÍA

PRODUCTION CHIEF
CESAR RODRÍGUEZ

EDITING
ETIENNE BOUSSAC and CRISTINA GALLEGO

MUSIC
NASCUY LINARES

VFX and POST
CINECOLOR

SHOOTING FORMAT
S35MM

SHOOTING LOCATIONS
AMAZONIC REGIÓN VAUPEŚ , GUAINÍA (COLOMBIA)