THE EMBRACE OF THE SERPENT

Academic Review

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The Embrace of the Serpent (2016) is a film by Ciro Guerra that tells the story of a Cohiuan[1] called Karamakate (Antonio Bolívar, Niibio Torres), an Amazonian indigenous man that suffered the annihilation of his tribe by settlers during the rubber boom and his later confinement in a catholic indoctrination mission during his childhood, and decided to live in solitude as the last of his tribe thereafter[2]. The plot focuses on two particular moments in his life, 40 years apart, when two white scientists come to him asking for help and their two journeys to find a Cohiuan sacred flower called yakruna.

Young Karamakate. Source: *The Embrace of the Serpent*, 2015

Loosely based on the existing diaries of these two scholars (Theodor Von Martius and Richard Evans Schulte) and the contribution of various indigenous advisors, it is a complex movie that explores postcolonialism and power relations through various narrative resources.

This review focuses on its decolonizing efforts and the questioning of some concrete positions 'in the making of the meaning'.

Decolonizing efforts

Films can constitute 'important communicative mediums for addressing key themes in development' (Lewis et al, 2013: 114, 127). Told through the eyes of the Amazonian indigenous man, Embrace of the Serpent is a relevant contribution to the

[1] Fictional tribe

[2] See The last of his tribe by Survival International: https://www.survivalinternational.org/articles/3105-the-last-of-his-tribe

'notion of subjectivity' (McEwan, 2018: 191-192) of indigenous peoples and an important attempt to question the 'white-gaze' so firmly entrenched in popular cinematic culture and even most notably in adventure and historical film. Many fictional texts created by indigenous and non-indigenous (as this case) people have done so before, but this film's importance also derives from its very wide, even universal, target audience - to the point of becoming the first Colombian film to win an Oscar nomination.

The narrative not only revises and somehow straddles the 'well-established archetypes' of White Saviors common to most 'mainstream' historical adventure drama films such as Lawrence of Arabia, Dances with Wolves or The Last Samurai (Ringle, 2019: 2) but also questions the knowledge hierarchy established by colonial powers in various ways that will now be described.

As John Clammer widely explains in Transforming the discourse of development, 'Development studies […] are often deeply anti-humanistic, for its real subjects, in all their existential depth, escape its grasp' and its mainstream thinking and discourses tend to forget the linkage with cultural and social matters and subjectivities (Clammer, 2012: 9-10).

By contrast, fiction can hardly ignore such matters, because during the construction of the characters, to design credible personalities, authors need to look somehow closer (or at least make up) the characters' ethos or 'radical imaginaries' described by Castoriadis.

In Ciro Guerra's film, this is very complexly addressed, firstly, by putting Indigenous Knowledge above Western knowledge to achieve the aspirations and motivations of its characters. Both white scientists need Karamakate's help and both have to respect his cultural codes and their tight connection to nature to get it. Also, the human and environmental horrors that the invasion of the Amazon by white peoples meant are regularly referred to and depicted, putting the Western invaders as the 'savage', 'hot-headed' ones that destroy everything they touch and need to learn from the Indigenous Knowledge. These reflections permeate the camera's point of view (POV), generally showing what Karamakate is seeing, and doing so from physical power positions, but also expressing the white characters' attempts to recentralize their colonial power and 'subjetify' the camera's point of view.

Theodor and member of an Amazonian tribe. Source: *The Embrace of the Serpent*, 2015

Eleven different languages are spoken in the film, but the most used is the protagonist's indigenous one in sharp contrast with virtually all 'mainstream' films depicting tribal people.

Karamakate is stronger, more disciplined, wiser and 'truer' than the white characters, showing own agency and breaking the cinematic stereotype of tribal characters in need of white saviors and imposed 'development'.

But the decolonizing efforts in this film go much further.

The way globalized societies understand time is a social construction that 'traditional societies' do not share (Eriksen, 2014: 24). Not even all Western civilizations or societies shared the 'linear Judaeo-Christian time' (Pieterse, 2012: 38-39) that has been 'standardized' through globalization. Against this colonial imposition of time and how it has been historically used to depict indigenous peoples as backward and primitive, some indigenous media uphold the concept of 'nayrapacha': an indigenous circuitous understanding of time, where the past can also be the future (Schiwy, 2009: 97-98). Ciro Guerra applies this idea to the narrative structure of the film by combining these two momentums when Karamakate is visited by Theodor and Evans. Even if 40 years separate both journeys, the film chains them as one, choosing the indigenous time structure over a lineal three-act narrative structure - which is the standardized narrative Western form.

In addition to this, there is an effort to contribute to the debate of the emic perspective of indigenous history. Indigenous understanding of its peoples' past is based on oral transmission and, therefore, has little to do with Western

historiography. In the case of numerous Amazonian tribes, the past is based on collective memory, origin, and shamanic interpretations and teachings. Thus, recent or past traumas conduct as catalysts of their history. In both journeys, the characters revisit key flashpoints in the Cohiuan history: the communal maloca, the violence exerted by rubber barons, the descent of the Gods to originate life, the residential missionary schools and the priests stealing their children, and the sacred yakruna as a symbol of the stripping of their culture, their land, their identity, their jungle. If we now reflect on how historical Western films repeatedly revisit flashpoints in white historiographies, the analogy is clear.

Lastly, there is a very profound reflection on 'exploration history' and the 'Objectifying gaze' of historical ethnologists and anthropologists. Throughout the film, Karamakate is visibly skeptical of how the white scientists take photos and notes in their study of indigenous cultures. At one point, Evans takes a photo of a huge mural that Karamakate has drawn, only to realize that it is impossible to fit it all in his camera's angle. At another moment, Theodor takes a photo of Karamakate and the later would not hand it back to him until Theodor directly asks for his permission to show it to the "world". Among other examples in the film, these address how Indigenous Knowledge(s) are impossible to constrain or even be fully understood under etic ethnology theories or depictions, and the fact that indigenous peoples deserve Free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) and ethic filming practices[3].

Kamamakate's mural. Source: *The Embrace of the Serpent*, 2015

[3] https://assets.survivalinternational.org/documents/844/ftpguidelines-print-pages.pdf

Making of the meaning: a long way to go

As Pailey explains 'Until the identities of those who shape and control development discourse, policy and practice diversify, development will always suffer from white gaze' (Pailey, 2019: 14), as will films on development issues like this one, devised by non-indigenous storytellers. 'Directly and indirectly benefitting from the erasure and assimilation of Indigenous peoples is a difficult reality for settlers to accept' so 'moves of innocence' (Malwhinney, 1988) or the maneuvering to lessen the guilt of settlers and audiences (Tuck and Yang, 2012) frequently appear in decolonial texts concocted by non-indigenous.

The decolonizing efforts in The Embrace of the Serpent are undeniable, but important pitfalls related to these 'moves of innocence' also appear.

I find that the construction of the character of Karamakate is one of these pitfalls. While the white characters show defined contexts and motivations, his aspirations only appear when white men do and his character arc depends entirely on their action. He works as an allegory, not as a realistic character, that is too reminiscent of the 'noble savage' figure.

But I find that the worst pitfall is undoubtfully the ending. The film ends by Karamakate handing the most sacred symbol of his culture, of his identity, of his world, after its destruction by white people, to white people. He realizes that his true mission in life is to hand to Evans the last sacred flower yakruna, the symbolization of the Indigenous Knowledge to avoid it dying with him, transforming him in a White Savior. The 'white man's burden' changes from 'the responsibility of civilizing the other' (McEwan, 2018: 156) to his responsibility to immortalize the culture he has destroyed. Only then the film, entirely shot in black and white, shows color. And "When metaphor invades decolonization, it kills the very possibility of decolonization; it recenters whiteness, it resettles theory, it extends innocence to the settler, it entertains a settler future" (Tuck and Yang, 2012).

These failures in 'the making on the meaning' are not anecdotal. As neither is the total absence of female characters in the film. In fact, these particularities are much more appreciable by the public eye than some decolonial approaches described earlier, such as the use of circuitous time.

To conclude, the use of black and white image and the reiteration that the white scientists 'diaries are the only known accounts of many Amazonian cultures' (*The Embrace of the Serpent*, 2015) surely give the vast majority of the audience the impression that this is a dim, outlived, distant memory. Quite to the contrary, a vast part of the 370 millions of indigenous people in the world today (of which 40% are tribal) suffer the postcolonial assimilation efforts of dominant societies daily, capitalist greed continues to lead to massacres, land theft, evictions, and the destruction of their lives and the biodiversity of their ancestral territories, more than 2 million tribal children are forcedly taught in residential factory schools where native languages are generally forbidden and, in most of the world, they remain nearly as silenced as then.

However, it can also be considered that a film about colonial guilt and postcolonial violence would not have reached such a universal audience.

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