



# EMBRACE OF THE SERPENT

COLUMBIA, 2015, 125 MIN

CIRO GUERRA

WINCHESTER  
FILM SOCIETY  
WINCHESTER  
SCIENCE CENTRE  
AND PLANETARIUM

"The horror! The horror!" The terminal valediction of Kurtz in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is deconstructed with a raging eloquence in the Colombian director *Ciro Guerra's* majestic, spellbinding film, "*Embrace of the Serpent*." Is the unspeakable savagery evoked by his dying words really beyond the reach of the civilized imagination? I doubt it.

That tricky word "civilized" connotes enlightenment, behavioral restraint, evolutionary advancement and the suppression of bestial impulses. But what is so civilized about mass slaughter, torture and planetary despoliation in the name of anything or anybody?

That is the uncomfortable truth at the core of Mr. Guerra's tragic cinematic elegy for vanished indigenous civilizations in the Amazon jungle. Viewed largely through the aggrieved eyes of a shaman whose tribe is on the verge of extinction at the hands of Colombian rubber barons in the 19th and 20th centuries, "*Embrace of the Serpent*," a fantastical mixture of myth and historical reality, shatters lingering illusions of first-world culture as more advanced than any other, except technologically.

The director's third film, it is the more remarkable for being shot in black and white, with one brief color

sequence near the end. Beautiful isn't a strong enough word to describe its scenes of the heaving waters of the Amazon and its tributaries, on which two explorers, separated by more than 30 years, navigate in canoes, accompanied by a shaman, Karamakate.

The film's central figure, he is the last survivor of an Amazonian tribe killed off by the rubber barons. He is no innocent, noble savage but an angry, morally complex individual with a heart full of grief. He may be in greater harmony with the natural world than any foreign intruder, but he is alone. The film gives full voice to his view of a social order in which the rules of nature assimilated and handed down through the centuries among the Cohiuano must be obeyed, or else.

In Karamakate's eyes, the European and American marauders who enslaved and destroyed his tribe are agents of an insane culture devoted to genocidal conquest and rapacious destruction. He finds the concept of money laughable; it is just useless paper. He urges the explorers to throw their luggage overboard. Their possessions are "just things," he scoffs. To the extent that the film persuades you that he is right, *Embrace of the Serpent* is potentially life-changing.

**Stephen Holden, New York Times**

**WRITING CREDITS:** *Ciro Guerra* **CINEMATOGRAPHY:** *David Gallego* **MUSIC:** *Nascury Linares*

**CAST:** *Young Kalamaktare Nilbio Torres | Old Kalamaktare Antonio Bolivar | Theo Jan Bijveot | Evan Mikheil Meskhi*

VOTING FOR *Timbuktu* A48 | B9 | C3 | D0 | E1 | Rating 92.2% | Attendance 61

Our next screening | *The Lobster* | Tuesday 18 October 2016. 8.00pm

"...a black-hearted flat-affect comedy... a dystopian world where being single is a criminal act"