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Embrace the Serpent

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Embrace the Serpent

Abstract

This is a film review of *Embrace the Serpent* (2015) directed by Ciro Guerra.

Author Notes

Rubina (Ruby) Ramji is an Associate Professor in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Cape Breton University. After serving as a Chair of the Religion, Film and Visual Culture Group for the American Academy of Religion and then on the steering committee, Rubina continues to serve on the Executive Committee for the Canadian Society for the Study of Religion as President and is the Film Editor of the *Journal of Religion and Film*. Her research activities focus on the areas of religion, media and identity, religion in Canada, and religion and immigration.

Embrace the Serpent
(2015)
Directed by Ciro Guerra



The Colombian film *Embrace the Serpent* follows the life of an indigenous shaman, Karamakate, the last member of his tribe. The film tells the story of Karamakate – World Mover – at two spectrums of his life: once as a younger man (Nilbio Torres) in 1909 and again as an old man (Antonio Bolivar) in 1940, who encounters Western botanists who wish to find a rare plant, the yakruna.

The story, told in black in white, is based on the diaries of true explorers who entered the Amazon forest. In 1909, Karamakate guides German botanist Theodor Kock-Grunberg, who has become ill and can only be healed with the rare yakruna plant. In 1940, Karamakate meets American Evan Richard Schultes, who also is looking for the yakruna plant, but for commercial purposes. By this time, Karamakate has lived alone in the jungle, the last member of his tribe, and

he has forgotten his memories because “the rocks, trees and mountains” don’t talk to him anymore. When Karamakate finds out that Evan cannot dream, he sees a kinship between the two of them, and agrees to help him as well.

Not only does *Embrace the Serpent* offer a critical perspective on the continued destruction of the Amazon forest by colonialist “white invaders” and the destructive nature of the Catholic church on the identity of young Amazonian orphaned children, it tells the story of loneliness and guilt, for Karamakate carries the history of his people, the rituals of his people and the language of his people upon his shoulders. The thirty year expanse illustrates how much the Amazon has changed, become commercialized and overcome by colonialism. It offers the story of the powers of the earth, rather than of humanity, and how it holds the answers to dreams, memories, and ritual. *Embrace the Serpent* is not just a movie about science, but about spirituality and the knowledge of science.