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“Knowledge Belongs to All, but You Don’t Understand that because You’re Nothing but a White”: The Mystical Philosophy of Embrace of the Serpent

Abstract

This article explores the implicit theory of mysticism in Ciro Guerra’s 2015 film *Embrace of the Serpent* (Sp. *El abrazo de la serpiente*). While many theories of mysticism argue that true mystical experience is unmediated and, therefore, universal, Guerra makes a more provocative statement in the film. He depicts two Westerners’ attempts to have an entheogenic mystical experience in journeys on the Amazon, guided by an indigenous shaman named Karamakate. While the first experience is unsuccessful, the second produces an astonishing mystical vision. The film’s apex transcends culture and suggests the power of the mystical to heal the trauma of colonization and cultural destruction, but not through an unmediated “universal” mystical experience. Rather, it is the “embrace of the serpent” to which the film’s title refers, based on Amazonian mythology. The film provides valuable insight into how mystical experience can facilitate cross-cultural understanding and deep healing after the trauma of colonization. Contrary to what a scholar of mysticism might expect, it is only by understanding culturally-specific mystical expertise can one transcend culture to benefit from the insights and healing of a mystical experience.

Keywords

mysticism, epistemology, indigenous, theory

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Author Notes

Rebecca Makas is an Assistant Teaching Professor at Villanova University. Her research interests include mysticism, Islamic studies, and epistemology. I wish to thank the attendees of the 2019 International Conference on Religion and Film for their comments on an early draft of this article, the helpful comments of two anonymous reviewers, and my brother Chris Makas for proofreading the article.

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.¹ -Ciro Guerra

Introduction

There is an implicit question in the above quote: how can one know the past, when the conditions for knowledge have been set by a colonizing force and the story of indigenous populations has been “lost”?

Ciro Guerra’s mesmerizing 2015 film *Embrace of the Serpent* (Spanish, *El abrazo de la serpiente*) invites viewers to reflect on how to meaningfully tell an arational story. Without a written record, Guerra notes that the indigenous people of the Amazon have not officially told their story—or told their story in a form that is deemed valid under rationalist epistemologies. The “valid” account has been given by explorers and those who colonized the land: those who had written records, photographs, and “realistic” artwork to tell the tale. Instinctively, Guerra and others know that there is a vast swath of knowledge left out of this account. How does one access it? In his bold statement that “in the cinema [the Amazon] can live again,” Guerra makes an

important epistemic claim. He argues that film not only allows him to make an entertaining feature, but also an accurate representation of a history that is “lost” in the official record.

The question of how to accurately represent, understand, and analyze something without an official record is of interest to scholars of mysticism, who must contend with how to understand an epistemology that ultimately rests on an experience beyond language. Guerra’s film provides a thought-provoking avenue to explore how to communicate mystical knowledge across culture.² The film facilitates such reflections in both plot and structure. The nonlinear narrative alternates between two journeys through the Amazon led by an Amazonian shaman, Karamakate, presented as the sole remaining member of the Cohiuano people. The journeys take place 30 years apart, but in both Karamakate leads white explorers in search of the sacred *yakruna* plant. As a young man, Karamakate guides German anthropologist Theo von Martius (based on German anthropologist Theodor Koch-Grünberg, 1872-1924), who seeks the plant to cure a life-threatening illness. In the second journey, the elderly Karamakate guides American botanist Evan (based on American scientist Richard Evans Schultes, 1915-2001), whose motivations are left ambiguous, but whom Karamakate believes to be the same soul he encountered in Theo years earlier. Though neither man seeks the plant specifically for mystical purposes, Karamakate attempts to guide both men through an entheogenic mystical experience. However, though both ingest entheogenic plants, Theo experiences no

change, whereas Evan has powerful mystical experience which serves as the film's climax.

The stark difference in their experiences makes a profound statement on mystical epistemology. The film's mystical apex transcends culture, through the "embrace of the serpent" to which the film's title refers, based on Amazonian mythology. Thus, the film provides valuable insight into how mystical experience can facilitate cross-cultural understanding and deep healing after the trauma of colonization. However, contrary to what a scholar of mysticism might expect, this is not accomplished by a universal mystical experience. Rather, only by understanding culturally-specific mystical expertise can one transcend culture to benefit from the insights and healing of a mystical experience.

To argue this, the article first provides an overview of the film and the dynamics of the relationships between Karamakate, Theo, and Evan to provide the overall context and epistemic issues relevant to Guerra's theory of the mystical. Next, I analyze how Guerra's filmmaking decisions allow him to tell a "lost" story and how such methods relate to the academic study of mysticism. Finally, using close analysis of two scenes from the film, I will present what I see as the film's theory of mysticism and its use for scholars of religion.

Rupture and Healing: An Overview of the Film

To better understand the mystical in *Embrace*, it is helpful to provide a brief overview of the film's major epistemic concerns. The film explores the problem of imposing a new system of knowledge on indigenous populations, along with the naiveté of trying to "preserve" a culture once such knowledge has been introduced. The film covers two white explorers' journeys in search of the sacred *yakruna* plant. Playing on the trope of white men needing indigenous healing or knowledge, Theo requires the plant for healing, whereas Evan claims to seek it as a botanist (though he admits later he is interested in using it to produce rubber for the war effort). Guerra's film complicates this well-trodden idea; though both Theo and Evan are presented as flawed, selfish, and ultimately unworthy of Karamakate's forgiveness, Guerra does not condemn them outright. The initial journey with Theo is openly antagonistic, with Karamakate deeming most European concepts of knowledge irrelevant to his own. While Theo attempts to learn from Karamakate and other indigenous people he encounters, he is frequently paternalistic and his sincerity appears false. In turn, Karamakate does not meaningfully try to teach Theo, but rather gives him directives without explanation. Understandably, Karamakate blames Theo for the destruction and change to his community by white explorers and settlers.

The journey with Evan shows the consequences of this decision. Karamakate is an old man with no memories—a *chullachaqui*. This trip is no less antagonistic, mostly because Evan requires Karamakate's knowledge, but Karamakate cannot or will not share it. Moreover, Evan's motivations are considerably less pure than Theo's. While Theo is presented as an anthropologist with genuine curiosity about indigenous language and culture, Evan lies to Karamakate and seeks the *yakruna* for rubber for the war effort. Yet as will be analyzed later, it is Evan, not Theo, with whom Karamakate ultimately shares his knowledge. The film culminates in a powerful scene in which Karamakate guides Evan through a mystical experience because he realizes the importance of teaching a white man his knowledge. This is perhaps the most interesting, but troubling, aspect of the film's treatment of preserving knowledge: the uncomfortable realization of a mutually dependent relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. Moreover, it forces viewers to sit with an uncomfortable idea: although those who commit harm may not *deserve* healing, their healing and atonement can nonetheless occur in tandem with the healing of those whom they have harmed.

In the journey with Theo, Karamakate understands Theo's worldview, but deems it irrelevant—a decision the film presents as complex and troubling. It is because Karamakate refuses to engage with Theo that he ultimately loses his memories. For example, he ignores Manduca, Theo's indigenous travel companion, who enjoins him to share his knowledge for the sake of preservation. In a tense

exchange at the beginning of the film, Manduca argues that Theo has “done more for our people than you [Karamakate] have,” because of his journals recording sacred rituals and knowledge.³ These journals come to be a constant source of tension, yet the film makes it clear that without such a record, Karamakate’s knowledge is vulnerable. In another scene, when Theo has disobeyed Karamakate’s instructions not to eat fish, Manduca urges him to continue with the journey. Manduca says, “I’m with him because we need him. He can teach the whites...If we cannot get the whites to learn, that will be the end of us. The end of everything.”⁴ While Manduca has appeared loyal to Theo out of affection to this point, it becomes clear that he is being strategic in his alliance, and realizes that given the change following colonialization, the indigenous population must demonstrate the value of their knowledge to the white people or risk its extinction. Indeed, this is what Karamakate chooses: he lets his memories and knowledge die with him rather than share with Theo. When they finally reach the Cohiuano people and Karamakate finds them changed, he sets fire to what he believes to be the last remaining *yakruna* tree, saying “this is the greatest knowledge of what my people were, and I won’t let you take it... never.”⁵ Here, one sees the notion that the knowledge is sacred and worth preserving, but not in the wrong hands. Because Theo is determined to be unworthy and unprepared, Karamakate decides that it is better for his sacred knowledge to be forgotten.

As a result of his decision, Karamakate becomes a *chullachaqui*, and the journey with Evan depicts him as an old man trying to recover his lost knowledge. Karamakate has lost his knowledge of sacred ritual but remembers just enough to know he has lost something. In an early scene, Karamakate asks Evan for *mambe* and when Evan gives it to him, Karamakate holds it for a moment and then realizes he no longer remembers how to prepare it. Evan takes it and prepares it for him. While in the initial scene Karamakate appears stoic, moments later he is shown crying in his hammock, saying “how could I forget the gifts the gods gave us? What have I become?”⁶ Through these moments and others like them in the second journey, Karamakate’s search for his lost knowledge and memories functions as a microcosm of the erosion of indigenous culture following the influx of Spanish colonizers and European explorers and missionaries. The journey with Evan is a near-complete reversal of the earlier trip. Here, Karamakate is vulnerable; his decision to allow his knowledge to wither leads him to feel empty. He is submissive to Evan and insists that he does not know the way to the *yakruna*. Furthermore, it is Evan who is antagonistic, albeit subtly. He often appears to be deferential to Karamakate and other indigenous people he encounters, but he lies frequently.

With such fraught relationships, one may ask: how is it possible for *either* Theo or Evan to understand Karamakate’s world? The film turns to the mystical, facilitated by entheogenic substances, to show how one can transcend the trauma of the invasive colonial/outsider relationship. The mystical themes and scenes of

the film lend support to this larger project of imagination and cross-cultural dialogue. However, the difficulty in expressing an experience-based epistemology is well known to theorists of affect, emotion, and embodiment. While any of these theories would be fruitful to discuss, exploring the mystical also helps us to understand several other prominent themes in the film, most notably the concepts of ineffability, cross-cultural dialogue, and the preservation of knowledge.

The Imagination as Reality: Creating the Conditions for Knowledge Through Filmmaking

The film's production process gives a methodology for cross-cultural understanding and recovering a "lost" story. Guerra developed an epistemology for writing the screenplay, shooting the film, and its presentation that rests on acknowledging distinct modes of knowledge and developing expertise in a different knowledge-production system as essential to transcending cultural barriers. It is a fraught process in which Guerra had to negotiate what he ultimately views as two valid knowledge sources: the "official record" of the white explorers, and the epistemology of the indigenous people of the Amazon who reject the importance and truth of the explorers' record. Moreover, as a non-indigenous Colombian filmmaker, Guerra felt pressure to accurately tell a story that was not his own. Film scholar Laura Marks argues that this need to turn to alternative means of truth-making is inherent to intercultural cinema, writing, "In the face of ... erasures,

intercultural cinema turns to a variety of sources to come up with new conditions of knowledge,” and often turns to “the very lack of images or memories, itself a meaningful record of what can be expressed.”⁷

The issues Guerra faced above are well-known to the scholar of mysticism: How can one critically and analytically present an experience beyond words? How can one respectfully represent such an experience? And how can one analyze the experience without lapsing into similar ineffability—i.e., asserting that one cannot understand unless one experiences something? Ineffability is frequently taken to be the cornerstone of mystical experience, and it seems difficult or even impossible for “outsiders” to accurately represent the experience itself or the knowledge gained therefrom. The difficulty of accurate representation stems from the fact that mysticism and its study are embedded within greater debates over the category of “religious experience,” and there has been extensive debate over the usefulness of this analytic category. Initial articulations of religious and mystical experience were rooted primarily in Protestant religiosity and emerged as part of an effort to rehabilitate religion and mysticism after criticism from Enlightenment thinkers. The Protestant theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) is often credited with providing the first argument for considering religious experience as the *sui generis* feature of religion. Schleiermacher’s basic premise had a profound and lasting impact on the then-fledgling field of religious studies, as well as popular notions of religion that endure to this day. However, it was William James’s

Varieties of Religious Experience (1902) that cemented the importance of experience as an analytic category for religious studies. While religious (and mystical) experience enjoyed a long reign in theory of religion, in the late 1970s and 1980s it came under fire. Wayne Proudfoot and others argued that the vagueness and tautological nature of many arguments for experience as the basis of both religion and mysticism is not accidental but a “protective strategy,” meant to shield religious beliefs from scientific criticism.⁸ However, Guerra’s production decisions provide an example of how one might approach communicating such knowledge.

Perhaps most importantly, Guerra realized that telling an accurate indigenous story meant uplifting sources of knowledge hitherto considered fiction—the indigenous perspective—alongside, and sometimes over, the “official” written records of Europeans. In interviews, Guerra says that he began the project intending to make “a historical and anthropologically accurate film,” and “structured the script in a way that was faithful to what really happened.”⁹ This was based on European travelogues, namely the travel journals of Theodor Koch-Grünberg and Richard Evans Schultes. However, he says,

As I started working with the Amazonian communities, I realized that *their* point of view regarding this story had never been told. *That* was the real film that I had to do because it’s the one film that hasn’t been done, that I have never seen, and that would make the film unique and special. In order for the film to be true to that, I had to stop being faithful to the “truth” because, to them,

ethnographic, anthropological, and historical truths were as fictional as imagination and dream, which for them was valid.¹⁰

This silence in the official canon of written source materials presents Guerra with a choice: either to replicate and reinforce the silence of the indigenous account of such events, or to engage in a process of what I term “creative empathy.” Through attentive engagement with indigenous source material, Guerra appeals to a distinct epistemology that utilizes “imagination and dreams” to present a story that appears “fictional” to the Western viewer, but accurate and true to the indigenous viewer. In so doing, Guerra invites viewers to reconsider what forms of knowledge “count” toward the official record. To make this film, Guerra conducted extensive research with indigenous Amazonian communities through interviews and reading about Amazonian mythology. In light of these conversations, Guerra fictionalized the name of tribes, plants, and some mythology in the film to avoid potentially trivializing sacred history and botany.¹¹

Similar to Guerra’s uplifting of forms of knowledge generally seen as “fiction,” the scholar of mysticism often must consider a form of knowledge seen as irrational, impossible, or imagined. Philosopher Mélanie V. Walton argues that mystical experience and its expression necessarily “[violates] logic’s command about the bounds of meaning.”¹² However, mystics and others attempt to communicate such an experience nonetheless because “Reason’s frustration compels us.”¹³ How to appropriately communicate such knowledge? In his seminal

work, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings* (1994), Michael Sells argues that mystics must utilize a specialized form of writing to express their experience because it is at fundamental odds with rational, discursive logic. Sells claims that the mystic is faced with three choices when confronted with the problem of ineffability: silence, negative theology, or unsaying.¹⁴ Unsayings “begins with the refusal to solve the dilemma posed by the attempt to refer to the transcendent through a distinction between two kinds of names [i.e., negative and positive]. This dilemma is accepted as a genuine *aporia*, that is, as unresolvable; but this acceptance, instead of leading to silence, leads to a new mode of discourse.”¹⁵ This new mode of discourse is better able to capture the paradoxical situation that the mystic encounters. By “refusing to solve the dilemma” of language directly, the mystic accepts that the experience is perhaps not compatible with formal logic. Sells argues that this discourse of unsaying is the most logically consistent for the subject matter of mysticism, despite the fact that it is evocative, evasive, and contains logical contradictions.¹⁶ Similarly, scholar of Neoplatonism Kevin Corrigan argues that “Plotinus’ [apophatic] language about the One, curiously enough, is not only reasonable—though not discursively reasonable; it is the *only appropriately thinkable* language for him to develop.”¹⁷

While the above scholars discuss how to express mystical experience with language, film allows for visual representation that defies logic, or perhaps more accurately, creates a new logic that is “appropriately thinkable” to express the

indigenous worldview. The choice to film in black-and-white signals to the viewer that the film is not documentary reality but an invitation to reflect on what constitutes reality and its accurate depiction. Guerra says that he chose black-and-white in part to evoke the anthropological images of Koch-Grünberg, but more importantly, because he realized that it was impossible to depict the “real” colors of the Amazon. In his mind, shooting in black-and-white would “trigger the imagination” and allow viewers into the “imagined Amazon.” Guerra argues that “what we imagine would certainly be more real than what I could portray.”¹⁸ The film’s aesthetic acknowledges immediately that it is not reality in the sense that the viewer might immediately expect. However, this allows viewers to open up to a new way of conceptualizing reality. Indeed, understanding the reality of the Amazon through indigenous eyes may depend on disrupting one’s “normal” chain of thinking. This process mirrors Robert K.C. Forman’s argument that mystical rhetoric is “designed to engender an *epistemological shift*, a shift in the way we use language and the way that we understand how language applies to experience.”¹⁹

Similarly, film’s cyclical narrative facilitates the epistemic shift described above. By the scenes shifting between Theo and Evan’s journey, the viewer is constantly made aware of the limitations of their notions of time as a linear narrative. Rather, they are invited into Karamakate’s vision of time and reality—in which Evan and Theo are the same person, whom he encountered twice in his life (and, as he notes late in the film, perhaps earlier or even “in a time without time”).²⁰

Indeed, one could even argue that the above overview of the film attempts to impose a linear structure, whereas Guerra indicates that Karamakate views Evan and Theo as a single soul and their journeys as a singular one, albeit interspersed across linear time. Such an insight demonstrates the limitations of the logical protocol of an academic article, and the expansive possibility of film to communicate the mystical. While one may be more easily understood on the surface, perhaps the other is more accurate.

Continuing to rupture most viewers' comfort, the film centers indigenous languages—languages unfamiliar to the majority of its viewers. The dialogue of the film is spoken almost exclusively in indigenous languages, with only occasional use of German, Spanish, and Portuguese. Facilitated through subtitles, viewers enter the world and hear the multilingual dialogue as it likely would have occurred. Notably, in contrast to films such as Alfonso Cuarón's *Roma* (2018), the indigenous languages are not set off in any way in the subtitles, which demonstrates that Guerra views it as unremarkable when an indigenous character speaks in their mother tongue. Of further political and representational significance, Maria Chiara D'Argenio argues that making indigenous languages the “default” both lends to the film's realism and helps *Embrace* to avoid the pitfalls of previous films' colonial gaze.²¹ This choice enables non-indigenous viewers to enter the cultural context of the film more fully. The translation process is also significant, as it was done in large part by one of the film's indigenous stars, Antonio Bolívar, who is one of a

handful of living speakers of some of the languages (which include Cubeo, Huitoto, Ticuna, and Wanano). Bolívar also taught actors Jan Bijvoet (Theo) and Brionne Davis (Evan) how to pronounce their lines.²² For indigenous viewers, Guerra notes it was a “big deal” to hear their languages at the cinema.²³ For non-indigenous viewers, the language choices reinforce that they are the outsiders and hence cannot rely on the comfort of seeing the film in a familiar language, as with *Fitzcarraldo* (1982), *The Mission* (1986), and others.

Furthermore, the use of indigenous languages invites reflection on how mastering a new language may be required to master a new landscape and culture. D’Argenio notes an inability to describe landscapes, cultural practices, and traditions, and renaming of these things was a key aspect of the colonial project.²⁴ Perhaps acknowledging the frequent claims of ineffability in 19th and 20th century travelogues, the film opens with a quote (in Spanish): “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 its splendor.”²⁵ The quote, minimally edited from the journal of the anthropologist Theodor Koch-Grünberg, is attributed to the character Theodor von Martius.²⁶ However, as D’Argenio argues, this is not the experience of the indigenous residents of the Amazon. She writes, “Unlike, and in opposition to, European travelers and conquerors, Karamakate can ‘conceptualize’ the jungle, relate to it, and even ‘verbalize’ it.”²⁷ This notion is supported by Guerra’s

comments in interviews that some Amazonian languages have up to 50 words to describe the varying greens of the Amazon. He notes that when he first arrived, he could not tell the difference, but through attention and learning throughout the shoot, he began to see and differentiate.²⁸ This observation highlights that what is ineffable in one linguistic and cultural context is fully communicable in another. One requires the *expertise* of the new context to verbalize and understand.

The cultural embeddedness of the film challenges the notion that mystical experience is universal or that its appeal depends on transcending culture. Since the mid-20th century, mystical experience has been of great interest to some who see in it the potential to prove that there is a universal reality shared by all human beings. This is best characterized by the work of Aldous Huxley and, more recently, Robert K.C. Forman, Richard H. Jones, and others. The basic premise of this philosophy—called Perennialism—is that there is a single, underlying reality that humans can directly access through mystical experience. Arguing that all mystics experience more or less the same thing allowed for the hope that humans could transcend cultural conditioning and reach their shared epistemological core. While Huxley's methodology and sources have by and large been rejected, his early influence was pervasive, and a number of contemporary scholars continue to hold Huxley's basic premises. This approach, known as Neoperennialism, seeks to refine Huxley's basic principles, bolstering them by offering more accurate translations of mystical writings and including a range of sources beyond classical mystical texts.²⁹

Neoperennialist scholars have worked tirelessly over the past 30 years to demonstrate that mystical experience must be unmediated by culture, religion, or language. Guerra's implicit critique of this model is perhaps the most important contribution to the discourse on mysticism.

While the film prioritizes the indigenous worldview, it defies an easy universalism by exploring an uncomfortable tension regarding knowledge in a post-colonial context: the paradox of destruction and preservation brought by the white colonizers. At the end of the film, a postscript appears stating that diaries such as those of Theodore Koch-Grünberg and Richard Evans Schultes are some of the only sources of knowledge of particular Amazonian cultures. Guerra dedicates the film to the “peoples whose song we will never know.”³⁰ This message indicates that while Guerra does not excuse Westerners for the violence and destruction of indigenous culture, there is the irony that some helped to preserve its memory. Given this situation, he believes that the indigenous epistemology is *equal* to the Western one, and equally necessary. However, he is clear in interviews that he is not calling for a “return” to an indigenous epistemology prior to the colonial encounter, noting that it is both impossible and not desired by the contemporary indigenous communities in the Amazon.³¹ It also speaks to his desire to create a new “official” record by performing a creative excavation on Western sources. As Marks writes, such a project entails “mourning for the terrible fact that the histories that are lost are lost for good.”³² However, such mourning does not mean further

silence; rather, through recourse to the creative and mystical, Guerra is able to depict a faithful rendition of the indigenous perspective and allow for the cross-cultural exchange of knowledge.

Guerra's filmmaking epistemology contributes to scholarly understanding of mysticism in three primary ways. First, it enjoins scholars that communicating arational knowledge often involves exploring new epistemologies. However, one must recognize that these epistemologies are not incoherent. Rather, they are distinct frameworks for knowledge that can exist alongside the rational and discursive. Second, the film demonstrates the need to shift away from comfortable modes of thinking in order to fully understand the mystical. And finally, it reminds us to recognize the messiness of cross-cultural knowledge exchange. One cannot imagine a pure, universal insight to bridge the trauma of colonialism or a simplistic solution to "go back" to the way things were. Rather, the use of the mystical occurs within culturally-bound spaces and requires that one engage in meaningful discourse, recognition of expertise, and training across religious, temporal, and cultural divides. Indeed, if there is any value in mysticism as a vehicle for cross-cultural understanding or healing, it is by appealing to specifics rather than nebulous universals.

Guerra's Theory of Mysticism and Cross-Cultural Exchange: A Study of Two Scenes

Along with the film's production, the narrative shows how one can use mysticism to transcend culture to understand the indigenous worldview and heal some of the wounds of the loss of knowledge through colonization and imperialism. Though one might expect this cross-cultural exchange to rely on universals, Guerra presents a more challenging notion: cross cultural understanding relies on acknowledging and accepting real differences in epistemologies and mastering a new set of knowledge. In many ways, Guerra advocates for a constructivist position on mysticism, and offers a challenge to Perennialist notions of universalism. Indeed, the film's presentation of mystical experience transcends culture and seems to provide profound healing to the wounds left by the colonial legacy. Thus, the film allows scholars of mysticism to consider a new theoretical possibility for how the mystical can transcend cultural conditioning: through embracing a new cultural expertise. To understand this, I will explore one of the film's primary cultural tensions and analyze how the mystical is presented in two key scenes.

Guerra defies prevailing universalist or Perennialist theories of mysticism which stipulate that truly universal experience must be unmediated. Philosophers have long argued that there are secondary mediating features of consciousness that filter our experience in daily life. Such factors include language, culture, religion, sensory objects, and indeed *any* subject-object duality. Therefore, if one can strip

away these filters that define normal consciousness and reach pure consciousness, one can reach a universal human experience. The ensuing mystical experience would be, according to W.T. Stace, a state of “undifferentiated unity” in which one does not “know” or “perceive,” but is simply aware or conscious. This experience is characterized as negative, as it involves the stripping away of differentiating states of consciousness in order to reach a state of complete unity.³³ Most important for this analysis, Stace and other universalists argue that this experience is more profound than mystical experiences that involve vision.³⁴ Furthermore, democratic accessibility is a key aspect of universal theories of mysticism; according to Robert K.C. Forman, such experiences need no prior training or preparation and can happen spontaneously.³⁵

While Guerra seems to believe that mysticism has the potential to transcend culture, his ambitious epistemological claims in *Embrace of the Serpent* cannot be accomplished by suggesting an unmediated “pure consciousness.” Instead, he presents a mystical experience that roughly aligns with constructivist theories of mysticism. The approach’s founder and chief proponent, Steven T. Katz, argues that mystical experiences are necessarily mediated and involve content. Moreover, Katz argues, they involve intense preparation that leads to the culminating experience that aligns with tradition and culture-specific expectations. Using Judaism as an example, he writes

...the entire life of the Jewish mystic is permeated from childhood up by images, concepts, symbols, ideological values, and ritual behavior which there is no reason to believe he leaves behind in his experience. Rather, these images, beliefs, symbols, and rituals define, *in advance*, what the experience *he wants to have*, and which he then does have, will be like.³⁶

The film's depiction of the mystical demonstrates the importance of cultural reference points and *expertise* for which Katz advocates. While not advocating a constructivist position, Jewish Studies scholar David R. Blumenthal extends the notion of expertise to highlight the epistemic function of mysticism. He argues that all mystical experience "must flow out of a well-organized hierarchy," and that such experience requires a specialized knowledge set which he calls "gnosis." However, contrary to Perennialist thinkers, this is not a single, underlying "gnosis" illuminating all the world's mystics. Rather, Blumenthal's "gnosis" will vary from one mystical practice to the next. In other words, there are distinct types of knowledge that different mystics harness to reach insight.³⁷

The constructivist theory of mysticism that Guerra assumes is clearest when one examines two scenes in the film: Theo's failed attempt at mystical insight, and Evan's successful vision through the entheogenic substance *caapi*. In spite of their antagonistic relationship, Karamakate believes that Theo has something of value when he discovers in Theo's notebook the image of a vision he once had.³⁸ Karamakate offers Theo *caapi* to explore the meaning of their shared dream that evening. The scene takes place around a fire, with low light. The two men sit on

opposite sides of the fire and are only shown in the same frame when Karamakate hands Theo the *caapi*. As he gives him the *caapi*, Karamakate tells Theo “drink without fear.”³⁹ Theo vomits, but Karamakate assures him that the substance has “cleaned his insides,” and tells him to drink again.⁴⁰ The scene continues to shift back and forth between shots of Karamakate and Theo, heightening the contrast in their experience. Theo appears to be tense, worried, and engaging in intense concentration, and Karamakate urges him to “let go,” and begins chanting quietly. Notably, Karamakate’s chanting is not subtitled, leaving its meaning and content open to the viewer. As this occurs, a brilliant shooting star is seen above them. The camera moves to an overhead shot, where we see both Karamakate and Theo. Karamakate looks up at the sky, while Theo’s head remains bowed.

The film cuts to the next morning, and it is clear that Theo was unable to gain any answers from the *caapi*. He asks Karamakate, “why wouldn’t Master Caapi talk to me?” Karamakate answers, “I don’t know, it’s never happened before,” and relates the vision he had of going into the jungle and seeing a jaguar and a god that turns into a snake.⁴¹ He interprets this as a mandate to kill Theo. Concluding the discussion, Karamakate says, “He spoke to you, but you couldn’t listen. I’ll have to show you.”⁴² Karamakate’s response to Theo’s failed experience is significant. First, it indicates that Karamakate believes that the issue is with Theo, not the *caapi* he prepared and certainly not the greater epistemology that grants visions and insights through its consumption. Second, he believes there may be

another way to show or teach Theo, indicating that the mystical is one of many methods of “translation” available to Karamakate.

However, and perhaps most importantly, this failed experience occurs when Karamakate assumes that his knowledge is universal or obvious. In other words, he provides no preparation for Theo (other than telling him to let go) and assumes that the *caapi* will simply work. This scene fits into the broader theme of the mystical characterized in the journey with Theo: a desire by the outsider to enter the indigenous world, but an inability to transcend culture. This is in large part due to Karamakate’s reluctance to explain or teach Theo the “rules” of the Amazon. Karamakate is clear what the rules are, but will not explain their rationale, presuming it to be obvious and clear. Through this, Guerra suggests that an entheogenic substance alone is not enough to access the mystical and transcend cultural divisions. Rather, one must thoroughly understand the new cultural references; in the film, this occurs when Karamakate shifts his role from provider to guide by *teaching* Evan how to experience the divine as he understands it.

In the later narrative, Karamakate decides to guide Evan in a mystical experience. This is particularly shocking when one considers that the scene occurs just after Evan has admitted to lying about his intentions and threatening Karamakate with violence. Evan protests, saying he is unworthy of such an experience, but Karamakate insists. As he prepares Evan for the experience, he tells him what he will see, preparing him to witness “time before life existed, before the

serpent descended.” He tells Evan it will be frightening, but he must “let her [the Anaconda] embrace you.”⁴³ The exchange is clearly presented as epistemological, because as Karamakate says, “I was not meant to teach my people, I was meant to teach you.”⁴⁴ Upon hearing this, the film switches to Evan’s perspective, with Karamakate directly facing the camera. He tells Evan, “Tell them everything you see... everything you feel. Come back a whole man.”⁴⁵ Once again, this indicates that Karamakate intends for the experience to impart *knowledge* that Evan is to share and disseminate—perhaps to “translate” into his own cultural and linguistic references. It also calls to mind the exchange earlier in the film when Manduca tells Karamakate that their survival, in some ways, depends on whites now. It seems after 30 years, Karamakate now believes Manduca, or believes Evan to be a worthier recipient of sacred knowledge.

The film then shifts into (presumably) Evan’s vision, bringing the viewer along for his visionary experience. It begins with fast panning shots above the jungle that are juxtaposed with “river-level” close-ups. Then, the perspective zooms out much further above the river, revealing to the viewer the massive size and serpentine bends of the Amazon for the first time. Viewers see a young Karamakate with glowing eyes and mouth. He opens his mouth, as if to begin the vision, followed by several black-and-white images of stars. From this, the film switches to color, showing several hallucinatory, pulsating images. These images are specifically what Karamakate prepared Evan for, and they support the

constructivist theory of mysticism by being culturally-specific. While not universal, this experience is perhaps *more* significant given the film's aim to uplift the indigenous epistemology and present it as equal with Western epistemology. Evan experiences mediated consciousness, but significantly it is mediated through cultural conditioning that was hitherto inaccessible to him. In other words, he is able to reach a non-Western understanding of the world that is accomplished through the mystical. Karamakate is able to communicate himself and the culture he seeks to preserve.

Guerra's appeal to constructivism demonstrates this mystical experience as an avenue which allows for a meaningful cross-cultural exchange. Rather than subsuming all epistemologies into one "whole," Guerra indicates that there are in fact differences between the epistemologies and experiences of Karamakate and Evan. However, through mediated, content-driven, culturally-specific experience, Evan transcends boundaries in a more impactful way than an experience of pure consciousness might. Instead of simply removing his own cultural mediation, Evan must also take on another culture. Significantly, in contrast to Katz's description, Evan does not have a lifetime of cultural, religious, and linguistic references to prepare him for such an experience. Rather, his experience relies upon Karamakate's preparation and his own willingness.

Conclusion

Theorists of religion have frequently appealed to mysticism to suggest a common core of human experience, showing a universal spiritual insight or consciousness that transcends culture, language, and any other mediating boundary. While *Embrace* suggests that the mystical is an avenue for cross-cultural understanding, it notably avoids the move to a universal human experience. Instead, through a culturally-specific mystical insight that requires training and expertise, Evan and Karamakate's fraught relationship is transformed. Though further investigations of the practical uses of the mystical for overcoming trauma and harm is necessary, the film raises profound reflections for the theorist of mysticism. First, it suggests that accurate representations of arational epistemologies may require creative reconstruction and imaginal forms of storytelling. Second, it calls attention to the inadequacy of definitions of mystical experience that assert that such an experience must be unmediated. Third, it reminds us of Katz, Blumenthal, and others' insights that mysticism requires expertise and an underlying epistemology. Finally, and perhaps most provocatively, it prompts consideration of the ways in which transcending culture is perhaps most profound when it entails true, deep understanding of another culture rather than a nondescript universal core of humanity. The world Guerra depicts resists appealing to "pure" experiences prior to colonization, an unchanging indigenous wisdom, or a simple portrait of marginalized groups. While such insights are difficult to reckon with, they

encourage all viewers to consider what it looks like to truly honor distinct epistemologies, and urges scholars of religion to reflect more deeply on the healing potential of mystical experience when one goes beyond a contentless universalism.

¹ *Embrace of the Serpent*, press notes.

² The film joins other noteworthy stories of attempts for outsiders to access indigenous knowledge, including *Sin Mapa* (2009), *Aguirre, The Wrath of God* (1972), *Dances with Wolves* (1990), *Cabeza de Vaca* (1990), and the book *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (1997).

³ Ciro, Guerra, *Embrace of the Serpent* (Sp. *El abrazo de la serpiente*), (2015; Colombia: Oscilloscope Laboratories), 1:30.

⁴ *Embrace of the Serpent* 1:30-131.

⁵ *Embrace of the Serpent*, 1:39:01.

⁶ *Embrace of the Serpent*, 0:19:31.

⁷ Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 23.

⁸ Russell McCutcheon, *Critics Not Caretakers: Redescribing the Public Study of Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 4; Robert Sharf “Experience,” in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, edited by Mark Taylor, 97-113 (Chicago, University of Chicago Press), 95; Ann Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building-Block Approach to the Study of Religion and other Special Things* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 2009), 3.

⁹ Ciro Guerra, “*Embrace of the Serpent*: An Interview with Ciro Guerra,” Michael Guillén, *Cineaste*, Vol. XLI, No. 2, 206. Web: <https://www.cineaste.com/spring2016/embrace-of-the-serpent-ciro-guerra>

¹⁰ Guerra, “*Embrace of the Serpent*: An Interview with Ciro Guerra.”

¹¹ *Embrace of the Serpent*, Press kit.

¹² Mélanie V. Walton, *Expressing the Inexpressible in Lyotard and Pseudo-Dionysius: Bearing Witness as Spiritual Exercise* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013), 283.

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- ¹³ Walton, *Expressing the Inexpressible*, 284.
- ¹⁴ Michael Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 1-2.
- ¹⁵ Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying*, 1-2.
- ¹⁶ Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying*, 2-4.
- ¹⁷ Kevin Corrigan, *Reading Plotinus: A Practical Introduction to Neoplatonic Philosophy* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press: 2005), 169.
- ¹⁸ Guerra, “*Embrace of the Serpent: An Interview with Ciro Guerra.*”
- ¹⁹ Robert K.C. Forman, *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 107. Emphasis in original.
- ²⁰ *Embrace of the Serpent*, 1:54:36.
- ²¹ Maria Chiara D’Argenio, “Decolonial encounters in Ciro Guerra’s *El abrazode la serpiente*: Indigeneity, coevalness and Intercultural Dialogue,” *Postcolonial Studies* 21:2, 131-153 (May 2018), 137.
- ²² Press notes
- ²³ Guerra, “*Embrace of the Serpent: An Interview with Ciro Guerra.*”
- ²⁴ D’Argenio, “Decolonial encounters,” 135.
- ²⁵ *Embrace of the Serpent*, 01:04.
- ²⁶ D’Argenio, “Decolonial encounters,” 134.
- ²⁷ D’Argenio, “Decolonial encounters,” 137.
- ²⁸ Guerra, “*Embrace of the Serpent: An Interview with Ciro Guerra.*”
- ²⁹ Forman prefers interview and contemporary first-person reports, arguing that texts privilege a constructivist position, and limit the access to experience. Jones and other Neoperennialists have also cited a number of neurological studies to support their position.
- ³⁰ *Embrace of the Serpent*, 2:01.
- ³¹ Press kit.
- ³² Marks, *Skin of the Film*, 25.
- ³³ W.T. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1960), 87. Emphasis in original.

³⁴ Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 49.

³⁵ Forman, *Mysticism, Mind*, 7.

³⁶ Steven T. Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism" in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, edited by Steven T. Katz, 22-74 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 33.

³⁷ David R. Blumenthal in *Philosophic Mysticism: Studies in Rational Religion* (Ramat Gan, Israel: Bar Ilan University Press, 2006), 24.

³⁸ *Embrace of the Serpent*, 0:41.

³⁹ *Embrace of the Serpent*, 0:43:55.

⁴⁰ *Embrace of the Serpent*, 0:44:27.

⁴¹ *Embrace of the Serpent*, 0:45-46.

⁴² *Embrace of the Serpent*, 0:46:50.

⁴³ *Embrace of the Serpent*, 1:53:45.

⁴⁴ *Embrace of the Serpent*, 1:54:50.

⁴⁵ *Embrace of the Serpent*, 1:55:32.

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