

“Embrace of the Serpent”: The Continuing Conquest

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Will we ever get over this thing called civilization? That’s what I wondered as I watched *The Embrace of the Serpent*, directed by Colombian filmmaker Ciro Guerra, a black-and-white film in several indigenous and European languages that has some of the qualities of a documentary. But this is a truer-than-history fiction, fabricated out of the travel diaries of two botanists, Theodor Koch-Grünberg (Jan Bijvoet) and Richard Evan Schultes (Brionne Davis), both of whom traveled in the Amazon region, the former in 1909 and the latter in 1940. The challenging and sometimes horrifying experiences of the two scientists are linked together by the character Karamakate who serves as guide to both and a challenge to each. (Nilbio Torres plays the young Karamakate and Antonio Bolívar the old Karamakate.) Both botanists are looking for *yakruna*, a rare, sacred, and hallucinogenic plant, and their search takes them into the jungles inhabited by peoples menaced by the encroaching modern world.



The clash of the rational and the spiritual is embodied in the *yakruna* plant, the object of the scientists’ search for knowledge and the vehicle of the Indians engagement with the spirit world.^[1] Director Ciro Guerra has said of Koch-Grünberg and Schultes, “These two were the first ones to treat them [the indigenous] humanely and the first to tell the world that this knowledge is important and that there is something we can learn from them.” But is that true? Or does it matter? While the apparently disinterested botanist who invades the indigenous world driven by scientific curiosity may even appreciate indigenous people, he is accompanied at the same time—whether he will or not—by the Christian missionary and the rubber company. Scientists are the product of civilization, and their science forms part of it. There is no escaping it. They are all part one long wave of western conquest, a tsunami that sweeps away everything in its path and leaves behind on the beach capital, wage labor, exploitation, and inequality, the state and its oppression.

Koch-Grünberg and Schultes find themselves, of course, dependent upon the indigenous people to help them travel along the rivers, to locate villages, and to find food. Thousands of years of habitation of the jungles have made the Indians the experts in that natural world, which is coterminous with their religious beliefs, because for them everything is spiritual and imbued with religious significance. In stark contrast to the naked Indians, the botanists have not only clothing but also all their stuff. With their boxes full of equipment, their compasses, their guns, their maps, and books, the scientists—disinterested as they may be—are western civilization in miniature. They are rational and empiricist, collecting evidence and data, making drawings and taking photos of the animals and the Indians, and creating collections of the butterflies pinned on boards in a box. They are boxing up and writing up this world to take it home. Their knowledge of the region will be published. Others, armed with that knowledge, will go: businessmen, anthropologists, the CIA, the military. They are not different than the conquest, they are its epitome.

While *Embrace of the Serpent* is set in the twentieth century, one immediately thinks of the great films about the Spanish conquest of the Americas, particularly Werner Herzog’s *Aguirre: The Wrath of God* (1972), based loosely on the life of Lope de Aguirre and his Amazonian expedition in 1560, Roland Joffé’s *The Mission* (1986), about Jesuits who strive to protect Indians from enslavement by the Portuguese, and of Nicolás Echeverría’s *Cabeza de Vaca* (1991) about a survivor of the Spanish

expedition of Panfilo Nervaes, who between 1528 and 1536, first as prisoner and then as shaman, traveled with Indians from Florida to Texas. These movies about the conquest come to mind when we watch *Embrace of the Serpent* because the conquest was not a time in the past but was rather an on-going process, one that still continues in some parts of the Americas (and some other parts of the world) even today.

The conquest in the Americas, from when it began with Columbus in 1492 to the twenty-first century, has always had the same essential elements: the Europeans (or later Americans) with their more advanced technology and their firearms, the diseases to which the indigenous peoples have no immunities, followed by the enslavement of those who survive the epidemics, and the destruction of the native culture. Warned by Fray Bartolomé de la Casas, the Defender of the Indians as he is known, that the Spanish conquistadors were killing off the indigenous peoples, the Spanish Crown forbid their enslavement or mistreatment—but those laws proved impossible to enforce in a New World thousands of miles away. The madmen, like Aguirre “el loco,” wild for gold and delirious with power, run amuck.

This is the situation presented to us by *The Embrace of the Serpent*—the violent ongoing encounter between Europe and the American Indians—and while it focuses on the two scientists and their search for the mystical plant of visions and revelations, the context is empire. If Spaniards of the sixteenth century were interested in gold and silver, the Europeans of the twentieth are interested, among many other things, in rubber and rubber meant slavery. In one horrifying scene Theo and his companions come across a rubber plantation and a worker whom the rubber lords have mutilated, cutting off an arm and a foot. He asks Theo and his companions to put him out of his misery. The film summons up in our minds all that we have seen in the movies and read in novels and histories about the rubber plantations and their slaves.

Latin America was the principal source of rubber throughout the nineteenth century, though later it was the Congo and then Southeast Asia, but everywhere the story was the same. Columbian rubber lords and the British-owned Peruvian Amazon Company (PAC) enslaved the Indians there. We are reminded of Nobel Prize winner Mario Vargas Llosa’s 2010 novel *The Dream of the Celt*, a fictional biography of human rights activist and Irish nationalist Roger Casement who challenged the PAC’s practices. We think too of Adam Hochschild’s *King Leopold’s Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (1998), the history of rubber in the Congo Free State controlled by King Leopold of Belgium, which produced rubber in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. There the African people were enslaved, their hands cut off if they failed to produce. Ten million died for rubber in the Congo. But we also think of Régis Wargnier’s brilliant 1992, Academy Award winning film *Indochine*, which deals with the woman owner of a rubber plantation in the early twentieth century—employing virtual slave labor—and her adopted Vietnamese daughter’s involvement in the Communist-led, national liberation movement in Vietnam. Like sugar and cotton, rubber meant slavery.

As if capitalism were not enough—there is also Catholicism. Koch-Grunberg and his indigenous traveling companions come across a Spanish mission. This is not the mission of the famous movie by that name where Jesuit fathers supposedly protected the indigenous. The friar in this film whips the boys who live there to stop them from speaking their native languages—the languages of the devil—and to force them to give up the practices of their indigenous culture. Schultes’ indigenous assistant interrupts a whipping, kills the priest, and they flee in their boat. But thirty years later, when Schultes and Karakamate come on the same village, we see that the one of the boys has grown up, declared himself the messiah king, and is reigning over the others in a bizarre community. The whole scene—indebted to Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and to Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now*—shows us the impact of civilization on the indigenous. Schultes and Karakamate are taken prisoner, but Karakamate cures the messiah’s wife, sick with leishmaniasis, then an orgy

of cannibalism ensues as the messiah invites his followers to eat him. The Catholic priests and rubber barons have destroyed the old culture, but in its place we find a misbegotten society—neither at home in the natural world nor a modern civilization—corrupt, degenerate, and violent.

Watching this remarkable film, one thinks, “What a horror it has been, civilization.” But there is no turning back to the world of the indigenous either, back to what Marx and Engels called “primitive communism.” We have to go forward, working to return to the world some of the balance and the beauty of our beginnings. Some of the humanity.

[1] Schultes, who spent nine years in the Amazon and discovered some 30,000 plants, would later return to Harvard University and write his best-selling *Plants of the Gods: Origins of Hallucinogenic Use* (1979), though he never became as famous as his colleague Timothy Leary. And unlike Aldous Huxley, Leary, and William Burroughs who claimed that drugs such as peyote, ayahwasca, and LSD brought them religious experiences, Schultes, always the scientist was more matter of fact. When Burroughs described ayahwasca as having been a profound metaphysical experience, Schultes—always the rational scientist, replied dryly, “That’s funny, Bill, all I saw was colors.”