Postcolonial Studies

ISSN: 1368-8790 (Print) 1466-1888 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cpcs20

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To cite this article: Maria Chiara D'Argenio (2018) Decolonial encounters in Ciro Guerra's *El abrazo de la serpiente*: indigeneity, coevalness and intercultural dialogue, Postcolonial Studies, 21:2, 131-153, DOI: 10.1080/13688790.2018.1466426

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13688790.2018.1466426

Published online: 10 May 2018.

POSTCOLONIAL STUDIES
2018, VOL. 21, NO. 2, 131–153
https://doi.org/10.1080/13688790.2018.1466426

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Decolonial encounters in Ciro Guerra's *El abrazo de la serpiente*: indigeneity, coevalness and intercultural dialogue

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the politics and aesthetics of the depiction of the encounter between the West and the non-West in Ciro Guerra's film *El abrazo de la serpiente*, examining how the film deconstructs colonialist imagery and discourses, and engages with the notion and cinematic representation of indigeneity. Through an interdisciplinary approach, the article identifies and discusses the strategies employed in the film to decolonise the category of the 'Indian': challenging the colonial linguistic of domination and undermining the tropes of imperialist representations; staging and re-enacting colonial encounters; and subverting the power relations embedded in colonialist ethnography. The article argues that *El abrazo de la serpiente* acts as an instrument of political and cultural inquiry into the past and the present, and that it both proposes and enacts *interculturalidad* and intercultural dialogue as a cinematic approach to native culture. While the notion of indigeneity at play is not unproblematic, the film succeeds in foregrounding Indigenous points of view and 'points of hearing', challenging a Eurocentric politics of recognition and evolutionary epistemology in favour of a 'coevalness' of the native.

KEYWORDS

Ciro Guerra; Latin American cinema; postcolonial cinema; indigeneity; Colombian Amazon

A year after the 1992 Columbus Quincentenary, J. King, A. M. López and M. Alvarado edited a collection of essays under the title *Mediating Two Worlds*. As the work's subtitle reads, the book gathered contributions that addressed various forms of 'cinematic encounters in the Americas'.[1] Among those essays, Jean Franco's study of the representation of tribal societies in feature cinema might serve as a useful point of departure for this article. Franco argues that European films that have represented tribal societies attempting to engage critically with Western colonisation and exploitation have, in fact, ended up 'reproducing oppressive acculturation'.[2] Her case studies are *Fitzcarraldo* (1982), *The Emerald Forest* (1985) and *The Mission* (1986). All these films fail, according to Franco, in representing the ecological concerns they set out to address. The main reasons for this she identifies as, first, the films' failure to adhere to their claims of historical truth; second, their transposition of contemporary (real) issues into the historical past, thus 'freez[ing] real problems in an anachronistic mode'[3]; third, the trope of a hero's journey, which reinforces rather than challenges paternalism; and, fourth, the arduous task of addressing ecological concerns in films that depend on capitalist modes of

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production. Franco pinpoints a difficulty in overcoming the exoticist gaze not only in Western cinema but also more broadly in the realm of art. She uses as an example of this issue the renowned 1984 MOMA art exhibition '"Primitivism" in Twentieth-century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern', stressing how the configuration of the exhibition betrayed the ethical intent that guided it by reproducing the asymmetrical power relations inscribed in the very notion of Primitivism.

The global political and cinematic arenas of the second decade of the twenty-first century are, of course, very different from those of the 1990s. Since then, Indigenous socio-political activism has gained in strength and visibility by articulating Indigenous people's rights and achieving changes in constitutional reform and jurisprudence.[4] If 1993 was proclaimed International Year of the World's Indigenous Peoples by the United Nations, more recently, the historical exclusion of Indigenous practices from nation-state institutions has been challenged by the appearance of 'earth-beings in social protests'[5] and national politics (in countries such as Ecuador and Bolivia). Furthermore, as Marisol de la Cadena puts it, the global circulation of the discourse and politics of indigeneity and the public presence of Indigenous intellectuals have 'successfully undermined evolutionary historicism's authority, to force a rethinking of the notion of indigeneity itself'.[6] Cinematically, since the 1990s, there has been a rise in Indigenous filmmaking that has challenged the dominant 'tropes of indigeneity', such as the 'binaries erected between the local and the global, stasis and movement, and dwelling and migration'.[7] In the art exhibition curatorial domain, a stronger presence of Indigenous artists has led to a questioning of the notion of the otherness of Indigenous art.[8] There have also been exhibitions, such as 'Primitivism Revisited: After the End of an Idea' (2006), that have explicitly revisited the 1984 MOMA show.[9] However, one should ask whether the Primitivist gaze has been surpassed in fiction films that deal with native cultures and whether cinematic contemporary representations of such cultures are (interested in) challenging imperialist ideologies, especially in the current context of transnational cinema, which seems to favour, as Randall Halle points out, the creation of 'distant strangers' and 'stories that Western audiences want to hear'.[10]

This article analyses the politics and aesthetics of the depiction of the encounter between the West and the non-West in the 2015 film *El abrazo de la serpiente*, the third feature film of Colombian director Ciro Guerra, focusing on the ways in which it engages with colonialism, colonialist imagery and discourses, and with Eurocentrism. *El abrazo* was very successful in terms of box office and critical acclaim. It won awards at Cannes and other international festivals and became the first Colombian film to reach the final shortlist of nominations for Best Foreign Film at the US Academy Awards. The Oscars nomination impacted on the film's distribution and prompted an interesting appropriation of it by the national media and certain state institutions, producing a feeling and narrative of 'national belonging'. As Claudia Triana de Vargas, the director of Proimágenes Colombia[11] put it, the nomination changed the film from one 'to be watched by Guerra and his friends' to one that every Colombian should watch 'otherwise they would […] feel guilty'.[12]

El abrazo is a black and white film shot entirely on location in the Amazonian departments of Vaupé and Guainía, and spoken mostly in Indigenous languages. The film's plot and mise-en-scène draw inspiration from the journals and photographs of Theodor Koch-Grunberg and Richard Evans Shultes, a German ethnographer and an American

ethnobotanist who, respectively, travelled in the region in the early- and mid-twentieth centuries, and whose works are among the main sources of information on the Amazonian cultures of Colombia. *El abrazo* relates the men's separate journeys across the tropical jungle and along its river in search of the sacred curative plant *yakruna* through a parallel narrative structure that cuts back and forth between the two journeys and the two different historical periods. The narrative element that bonds them is a man called Karamakate, the main protagonist – a native shaman, the last of his people, who possesses knowledge about the *yakruna* and agrees to guide both scientists in their search. He is depicted as a young shaman/warrior in the first story and as an older subject dealing with the loss of his knowledge and identity in the second.[13]

The film engages with several of the problematics discussed by Franco: the link between native culture and the past, the recapitulation of the history of the Amazon, the claims of historical truth. Moreover, it presents a visual and narrative language that dialogues with both art-house and mainstream cinemas. Nevertheless, in what follows, I argue that not only does *El abrazo* avoid re-enacting oppressive acculturation, it also manages to deconstruct the racial hierarchies and structures of dominance that belong to imperialist practices and discourses, as well as address, albeit ambivalently, some of the contemporary issues surrounding indigeneity. I also argue that the film acts as an instrument of political and cultural inquiry into the past and the present and that it both proposes and enacts *interculturalidad* and intercultural dialogue as cinematic approaches to native culture.

Opposing the linguistic of domination

El abrazo opens with a caption (in Spanish) that serves as an epigraph:

> It is not possible for me to know whether the infinite jungle has already started on me the process that has taken many others to complete and irremediable insanity. If this is the case, I can only apologise 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 splendour; all I know is that when I came back, I had become a different man.

The words appear on a black screen while the sound of the *selva* anticipates the next scene. Amazonian nature is subsequently shown: a shot of the river frames the trees reflected in the water; then the camera, placed at river level, moves towards the shore showing an Indigenous subject – Karamakate – in a squatting position.[14] Partially naked and wearing significant accessories, he has a fierce expression and is looking attentively at the river when he notices an imperceptible modification of sound. The camera then cuts to Karamakate framed from behind, surrounded by vegetation; the camera zooms in towards him until an over-the-shoulder shot shows us what he is seeing: a canoe arriving at the shore. In the canoe are the sick von Martius and his Indigenous guide Manduca; they are looking for Karamakate in the hope of his being able to save the life of Theo who, we soon find out, can be cured only with the *yakruna*, a sacred healing plant, knowledge of which only Karamakate and his people hold. From the start, the visual language employed challenges the negative politics of recognition that inform Eurocentric verbal and visual discourses: editing and image composition give Karamakate centrality; his accessories, face painting and bodily gestures convey warrior-like qualities that do not fit with conventional Western imagery of Indigenous shamanism (Figure 1); the native subject is framed

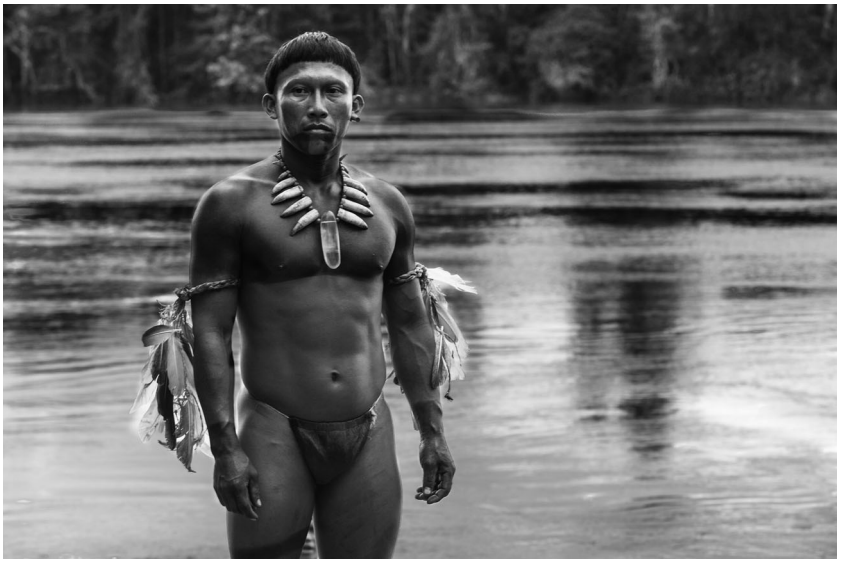

Figure 1. The young Karamakate – courtesy of Peccadillo Pictures.

alone and not in relation to a white man; and, finally, an Indigenous 'gaze', which is constructed through camera work and mise-en-scène, leads the spectator to assume Karamakate's point of view.

I will return to the visual depiction of Amazonian people and landscape, but now I want to focus on what happens on the screen before their visual entrance into the story. Significantly, the first depiction of the jungle is the verbal image articulated in the caption/epigraph. The latter is presented as a fragment of Theodor von Martius's journal written in 1909 during his journey through the Amazon. In fact, as made evident in the film press notes, the fragment is an edited translation into Spanish of a diary entry (dated 1907) taken from one of Theodor Koch-Grünberg's journals and differs very little from the original text.[15] Despite the minimal changes, the very acts of selecting and editing the early twentieth-century text are key because they highlight a set of Koch-Grünberg's statements that reformulate the tropes of colonialist representational regimes. The caption is also relevant because, as I will show, it constructs an image of the jungle that is challenged throughout the film. The caption represents Indigenous geography through the tropes of threat and desire, danger and wonder, on the one hand, and ineffability and the sublime, on the other hand. Together, they have defined the New World's land and tropical reality in European travel writing, from the early chronicles to the romantic writers and beyond. Along the lines of such previous narratives, the caption describes the jungle as a place of otherness, opposed to rationality: it produces 'insanity' as well as 'enchantment'; its 'infiniteness' is associated with beauty and splendour. Its language reformulates a well-established repertoire of tropical images that had been articulated in accounts of colonial encounters to both justify the colonial enterprise and construct the 'modern' identity of Europe.[16] Columbus repeatedly used the terms '*maravilla*' (wonder) and '*maravilloso*' (wonderful) in his letters and diary. In the sixteenth century, Bernal Díaz del Castillo held that 'it was like the enchantments they tell [of] in the

legend of Amadis'.[17] Such imagery persists in the romantic depictions that associate the tropical jungle with origin, transcendence and immensity.[18] At the turn of the twentieth century, when von Martius's story is set – in the context of European formal and informal colonialism and the 'rediscovery of America' brought about by Latin American nation-building a century after independence[19] – textual representations of the tropics were prolific in both European and Latin American fiction – from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) to José Eustasio Rivera's *The Vortex* (1924) and Rómulo Gallegos's *Canaima* (1935). These works, as Charlotte Rogers explains, represent the jungle as the primitive other of European civilisation – as 'a timeless place, a "place devoid of history"' – although, according to Lesley Wylie, texts such as Rivera's and Gallegos's used those tropes to counter rather than support the dominant relations of power between Europe and Latin America.[20] In the same years, a similar process of othering the tropical jungle was employed in modernist Primitivism.

Among the tropes of colonialist discourse, I am particularly interested in that of 'ineffability', a notion that has been used to represent the Americas from the time of the early conquerors into the early twentieth century. If Hernán Cortés declared that 'There is no human language able to explain its greatness and peculiarities',[21] the texts of the early twentieth-century *novela de la selva* presented a jungle that 'insistently overwhelms the traveller and his ability either to comprehend or to describe the tropics'.[22] This sense of the ineffable prompted the 'imprecise language of "marvel" and "wonder"',[23] which is found in both the early chronicles and in nineteenth-century documents and resonates with the aesthetic of the unrepresentable that informs the early twentieth-century texts as well as Alejo Carpentier's concepts of *Real Maravilloso* and American Baroque language.[24] In addition to a specific rhetoric of wonders, that 'impossibility' also produced very powerful strategies of appropriation. The linguistic and conceptual impasses engendered by the encounter with the new lands led to political strategies of naming and fictionalisation. As Beatriz Pastor argues in her 1983 seminal study of the narrative discourses of the Conquest, travellers encountered a reality that they 'were not able to conceive of' in real terms.[25] Referring to Columbus, Pastor explains how he did not 'discover' but rather, drawing on a set of textual sources,[26] 'identified' and 'verified' the geography, flora and fauna he had before him, thus fictionalising the American lands and the very process of the 'Discovery'.[27]

In reformulating Koch-Grünberg's statements on the difficulty to describe the 'infinite jungle', von Martius's words re-enact the linguistic impossibility, or sense of ineffability, mentioned ever since the earliest European encounters with the Americas. However, the actions prompted by such impossibility in von Martius's case, as compared to the late fifteenth century, are very different. In addition to reducing, deforming and fictionalising the new realities, Columbus and the subsequent conquerors carried out political acts of naming. The linguistic act of naming was a performative exercise of power that shaped the imperialist venture. Ever since Columbus, naming has been an instrument of claiming territory and taking possession. The political implications of naming have been underlined by several scholars. In Evelina Guzauskyte's synthesis, naming is defined as an 'an act that first erases and negates (thus creating vast spaces of *terra nullius*) and then invents a new world based on mental constructs rather than the physical reality'[28] and as a manifestation of power. In Columbus's enterprise, naming was a 'political act of appropriating and legitimizing as the names of places were inserted into what Greenblatt has called the European

representational machinery'.[29] As Stephen Greenblatt explains, for Columbus, taking possession was a performance of a set of official and public linguistic acts: declaring, witnessing and recording.[30] Naming has been a crucial practice of dominance of both formal and informal colonialism. It was a way of appropriating not only territories but also nature more generally. Scientists were deeply implicated in European formal and informal colonialism – in what has been called 'scientific colonialism': 'a process whereby the centre of gravity for the acquisition of knowledge about the nation is located outside the nation itself'.[31] Whether coming or not from the formal colonial power, botanist expeditions mapped the South American regions before and after the regions' independence from Spain. In the seventeenth century, new human sciences ordered 'the varieties of humankind into a single natural hierarchy of difference and similarity'.[32] Anthropology, for example, developed with European colonisation of the non-Western world, participated in the colonial organisational system[33] and reinforced the epistemological basis of imperialism.

Through the epigraph and the characters of the scientists, the film engages with the historical and political nexus between language, power and naming that has shaped the history of the encounter between the West and the non-West in the Americas. While the caption/epigraph evokes the linguistic impossibility generated by the encounter with the 'discovered' territories, and the subsequent strategies of appropriation/fictionalisation, the characters of the ethnographer and botanist evoke the Eurocentric 'rationality' that became hegemonic with the colonisation of the Americas,[34] as well as, more specifically, the role played by the natural and human sciences in identifying and cataloguing the workings of colonialism. The film is critical of exactly this nexus. *El abrazo* challenges the imperialist linguistic of domination by deploying a set of strategies that ultimately replace the politics of 'naming' with the politics of 'translating'. One strategy is seen in the characterisation of the scientists. Neither scientist is depicted carrying out taxonomic activities. They are not identifying, naming or cataloguing nature or people in their scientific work; instead, they are portrayed in a condition of lack. Theo lacks health and the necessary knowledge that might cure him. Similarly, Evan lacks knowledge about the *yakruna*. They are both looking for and needing the help *and* knowledge of the Indigenous Karamakate. The positioning of lack here is eloquent since lacking has been a key trope of colonialist and Eurocentric discourses in their depiction of the non-West. According to Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, the construction of lack can be understood as 'the projection of the racially stigmatized as deficient in terms of European norms, as lacking in order, intelligence, sexual modesty, material civilization, even history'.[35] Paraphrasing Teresa de Lauretis on the subversion of gender roles in the cultural production, the film positions the scientists outside (of, namely, power) by displacing them within it.[36] What is displaced here is the Western scientists' agency. According to Wylie, in postcolonial writing about the tropics, the jungle is no longer a 'source of self-edification'[37] for the Western traveller. In our case, the jungle is not even depicted as being an object of study of Western science. As we shall see, the physical and epistemic vulnerability of the scientists and their dependence on the native shaman subvert not only the colonial hierarchies but also the values associated with Western modernity.

A second strategy is the centrality afforded Indigenous languages. *El abrazo* is spoken in several Indigenous languages and several Western languages: the dominance of the colonial language (Spanish) is undermined by the use of Portuguese, English, German and Latin, but more especially by the primary use of Indigenous languages over Western

ones: the film is spoken mostly in *cubeo*, *uitoto*, *ticuna* and *guanano*. The use of language is crucial in films that deal with indigeneity. The representation of the voice is a cinematic mechanism that may challenge Eurocentrism by employing a polycentric and multicultural approach.[38] Against both Columbus's denial of the Indigenous voice and the depiction of 'a' dominant language, the very couple authority/language is contested in *El abrazo's* multilingualism. Furthermore, multilingualism is also part of the characterisation of the Indigenous people. Manduca, for example, in addition to speaking Spanish and German and his own Indigenous idiom, shows some familiarity with other native languages when he addresses Karamakate for the first time. While such multilingualism might have been a choice that responds to a search for verisimilitude, what is relevant is that it contributes to dismantling the colonial positioning of knowledge and overturns its representation of lack. It is Theo who needs to speak Karamakate's language, not the other way around. And it is Karamakate who establishes what language they must speak. Theo's knowledge of the native language does not show superiority, nor is it associated with the exercise of dominance.

A third crucial strategy is the deconstruction of the conceptual and linguistic impossibility commented upon above. This is achieved through the character of Karamakate. Having been informed by Theo that members of his people, who he thought had all been killed by white men, are still alive, Karamakate reluctantly agrees to take the scientists to them to find the *yakruna*. In accepting, he sets the rules to which Theo must agree:

> The jungle is fragile. If you attack her, she strikes back. She will only allow us to travel if we respect her. We must not eat meat or fish until the rains begin and we ask for permission to the Owners of Animals. We can't cut any tree from its root. If a woman is found, no intercourse until the change of moon. Do you accept?[39]

These rules give us clues about the relationship between nature and human beings proposed in the film. The very setting of rules of behaviour implies an understanding of the jungle as an 'earth-being', to borrow the term from de la Cadena.[40] Unlike, and in opposition to, European travellers and conquerors, Karamakate can 'conceptualise' the jungle, relate to it and even 'verbalise' it. The relationship between human and non-human beings is not one of dominance but one of respect: the jungle is a being which needs to be 'respected', is 'fragile'. Its 'fragility' challenges the Eurocentric representation of a nature that overwhelms, dominates and drives a rational Western man to madness. Furthermore, Karamakate verbalises its needs. His linguistic operation can be understood as an act of translation: he renders the non-verbal signs of the jungle into verbal signs; moreover, these are communicated to the Westerner as a condition of granting the latter access to the native world. While in Eurocentric representations the Euro-American character acts as a mediating bridge, here, it is the native character who serves as such. This film does not eliminate the 'otherness' of tropical nature; rather, it deconstructs its colonialist attributes. In a way, Karamakate is translating for the sake of the European traveller the relationship between the Indigenous subject and the territory, the sense of belonging to the land that is a defining feature of (the representation of) indigeneity. However, this belonging is not rendered through an exoticised, primitivist or aestheticised tellurism; instead, we are presented with a relationship of respectful coexistence and awareness of the fragility of nature, which speaks more to current ecological concerns and processes of rainforest exploitation than to imperialist discourses.

In this film, language might be understood as a 'contact zone', adapting Mary Louise Pratt's notion, rather than an instrument of power (as in colonialism): in other words, a site for 'cultural encounters, wherein power is negotiated and struggle occurs'.[41] Language(s) allow(s) cultural encounters of different kinds, all involved with power relations and historical struggles. Within the film's story, language allows the encounter between the travellers and the natives and the symbolic sharing of experience and knowledge; it also allows, as I have argued, contact between the Westerner and nature – through the mediation of Karamakate. But the notion of 'contact zone' applies also to the linguistic and cultural interactions that the making of the film entailed. The making of *El abrazo* involved a textual study of written sources on Amazonian cultures and on field research in the Amazonian communities. The latter, in which Guerra was helped by anthropologist Ignacio Prieto, proved to be crucial for the filmmaker's understanding of Indigenous cultures and for establishing a dialogue with the communities, each of which was asked for permission to shoot in their territories. What is interesting about this dialogue is not only the information gathered, which fed into the film script (in terms of cosmogony, mythology and history), but also the very encounter between people from different cultures and languages that lies at the heart of the film. Here, the 'racial politics of casting' come into play.[42] Unlike other films on the tropics, the Indigenous characters here are played by non-professional actors from the regions where the film was shot. Although the film is a re-creation of a fictional world, with no real names of natural features, plants or sacred beings used, the languages spoken are among the native languages of the Colombian Amazonian region. Since they are not written languages, the production crew used a translation technique that would not involve writing. They created a sort of 'Indigenous dictionary' to be learnt by the non-Indigenous actors (Jan Bijvoet and Brionne Davies).[43] Hence, pre-production and shooting were dependent on native people's agency: the members of the Indigenous communities granted permission to the crew and shared their history and culture, which were reformulated and adapted in the script; the Indigenous protagonists did not follow a written script but rather translated ideas communicated by the filmmakers;[44] during the shooting, native people collaborated by manufacturing elements of the mise-en-scène such as clothing accessories.

Although a fictional film, *El abrazo* presents the 'intertextuality' that David MacDougall identifies as a key element of ethnographic filmmaking. MacDougall's notion of intertextuality refers to the multiple voices that make ethnographic plural cinema. As Charlotte Gleghorn points out, for MacDougall, intertextuality has less to do with 'layers of citations', a notion coming from linguistics and literature, than with what he calls a 'repository of multiple authorship'.[45] In *El abrazo*, both notions are applicable, but it is this second notion that allows us to address aspects of the film that, alongside others, challenge the dominant Eurocentric gaze. This second notion of intertextuality, coupled with the film's engagement with ethnography via ethnographic photographs, mise-en-scène and Western characters give the film the 'ethnographic feel' signalled by some reviewers. While this assessment might be easily contested – the film uses ethnography but could not be defined as an ethnographic work – the function of intertextuality is even more important since it undermines the 'heterogeneity' of this film.[46] Despite its heterogeneity, *El abrazo* does not fall into the incongruities or slippage that Franco identifies in the postmodern *indigenismo* of twentieth-century films, as I will argue in the next sections.

Decolonial encounters

The above-mentioned displacement of the grammar of lacking is part of a broader displacement in the positioning of knowledge. There are two sequences in which *El abrazo* exhibits this dislocation while also challenging the Eurocentric paternalism embedded in the ideas of the good savage and primitivism. The first depicts the encounter between the Indigenous subjects and Western technology – photography – an encounter that is inevitably problematic since it recalls the material and symbolic signs of Western civilisation and the hierarchies embedded in the history of colonialism and early anthropology. When the young Karamakate sees his image on Theo's photographic plate, his first reaction is to keep it as it is 'him'. However, after Theo explains that it is an image, Karamakate is not portrayed as either speechless or surprised, that is, as one lacking the necessary knowledge to understand what is before him. Maintaining the same fierce pose that he has throughout the film, Karamakate performs another act of translation, understood in its broad meaning of transposition of one set of signs into another and as an act of cultural rendition. Karamakate 'interprets' Western technology and translates it into his own language and cosmogony. He reads the photograph as a *chullachaki*, an empty human being. This act of cultural translation undermines the 'primitiveness' of the native and deconstructs the colonialist belief in the superiority of Western technology/modernity. Furthermore, it challenges the hierarchies embedded in the ethnographic encounter. The asymmetrical relationship of anthropologist and native subject as 'observer' and 'observed' is replaced with an intersubjective communication between two interlocutors, which undermines the 'otherness' of the native typically constructed, as Johannes Fabian has demonstrated, in anthropological accounts.[47] Although the natives in this film are depicted as historically oppressed by the white man, Karamakate is not represented as a subaltern figure but rather as one able to counter such colonial ideas of superiority with Indigenous mythologies and beliefs. The native shaman symbolises a whole civilisation, which is represented equally, if not more complexly, than Western civilisation.

The use of the *chullachaki* myth has further implications. For one thing, it is an example of the film's adaptation and reformulation of existing practices and myths, which enables Guerra to construct a fictional yet convincing depiction of Indigenous culture. In this context, it is important to again note that no real names of plants or other earth-beings considered sacred by native communities are employed in the film. This is an example of the film's rigour and intercultural respect in approaching native cultures, respect that, it has been noted, is often absent from Western films about native peoples. These two notions are evidence of how the film addresses the ethical issues and responsibility at stake in artistic practices that involve minorities and how the film's 'intervention' in the life of local communities has not been disruptive.

It is precisely such rigour and cultural awareness that allow the film to mix heterogeneous native cultural material without incurring the risk of creating fake 'instant Indians'.[48] In fact, the *chullachaki* myth does not come from Colombian Amazonian cultures. The *quechua* (of uneven foot) refers to a myth of the Michiguenga people of the Peruvian Amazon. The *chullachaki,* able to transform into different creatures and to deceive, is a feared mythical figure. The transformational element is reformulated in the film as 'empty body'. This figure is given an allegorical meaning in the story. The old Karamakate declares that he has become a *chullachaki* since he has lost his knowledge

Figure 2. Manduca, Theo and Karamakate – courtesy of Peccadillo Pictures.

and, hence, his identity. In this way, Guerra speaks to the current loss of traditional culture felt by some members of native communities after contact with the outer world.[49]

The second sequence, in which Eurocentric notions of primitivism are challenged, is more explicit. During their journey, Karamakate, Manduca and Theo (Figure 2) receive hospitality from a local native community, one Theo already knows. When the three set out to leave, Theo realises that the natives have kept his compass. He accuses them of stealing it and tries to get it back but is stopped by Manduca and eventually agrees to leave. Through the subsequent dialogue between the ethnographer and Karamakate, we understand that Theo's concern was not the loss of the instrument but rather the loss of native ancient knowledge that use of the foreign technology would entail. When Theo explains this to Karamakate, the latter suggests the scientist is being paternalistic, saying he cannot prevent them from learning and that white men do not possess a monopoly on knowledge. This scene mobilises ideologies and identifications. The Western spectator identifies with Theo – his misinterpretation of the act of exchange/stealing and his genuine concern with the natives' 'authenticity'. However, all these ideas are shattered by Karamakate's words, which reveal Theo's ethnographic paternalism and challenge the notion of a monopoly on knowledge, just as they do a monopoly on language. But, more importantly, Karamakate's words are also a critique of essentialist notions of indigeneity that freeze Indigenous cultures in the past and recommend preservation, and of the 'salvage idiom [that] attempted to repress signs of change' in those cultures, which draws on the idea that 'values originating elsewhere are polluting of some reified notion of culture and innocence'.[50]

The reflections triggered by these sequences encourage us to think of this film as an instrument not of rhetorical inquiry, as Christopher Carter argues in relation to other

films critical of colonialism, but of cultural, political and even ethical inquiry[51] – an inquiry that is not limited to the past but concerns the present too. This, while arguably opening the film's ideological appeal to a global audience, distances it from the films and the MOMA exhibitions discussed by Franco, as well as from other more recent and thought-provoking contemporary artistic productions. A relevant example is the interesting work of Colombian artist Alberto Baraya. In his *Herbario de plantas artificiales*, an in-progress project started in 2000, Baraya uses his installations made of artificial plants and flowers to perform a critique of scientific expeditions' colonising enterprise in the Americas. He transfers scientific methodology to the art domain; he collects, catalogues, archives, analyses and displays artificial plants, producing alternative taxonomies that invert the binary fiction/truthfulness.[52] His 'alternative interpretation of scientific discourses' aims to undermine the equation science = truth: 'By picking up […] plastic flowers on the street, I behave like the scientists that Western education expects us to become […]. By changing the goals of this […] task I resist this "destiny"'.[53] But while Baraya's work can certainly be seen as an act of resistance, we might ask what inquiries into the present it prompts and what current identities, hegemonies and representations it mobilises.

In addition to the above-mentioned fictional encounters charged with symbolic meanings, the film also depicts discrete historical encounters between native Amazonians and white men as shaped by massacres and abuses. *El abrazo* refers to two specific events of Western exploitation: missionary-forced evangelism and the atrocities of the rubber trade. On their way to the Cohiuano people, Theo, Karamakate and Manduca stop at the Capuchin Mission of Anthony of Padua in the Vaupés region. In the film, the mission is situated in the former rubber station of La Chorrera. This sequence relates to the religious and political role played by the missions in the colonisation of the Amazonian territories, a process that was undergoing a revival at the turn of the nineteenth century. As Amada Carolina Pérez explains, from the mid-1800s, missionisation was promoted by the expansionist aims of both the Vatican and the then recently established Colombian state. With the rise of global capitalism and need for primary goods, new missions received state funding, in line with the 1887 Concordat.[54] The aim of the missions was to 'civilise the savages and convert them into sons of God and of the homeland' while taking care of the nation's borders.[55] In *El abrazo*, the character of the friar embodies the missionary repertoire of themes and discourses as they have reached us through official reports. As Pérez points out, friars' typical view of indigeneity was shaped, not surprisingly, by the dichotomy between civilised society and Indigenous savagery. Among the motives that justified missionary labour was 'bringing [Indigenous subjects] out of the shadows, of barbarism and primitive life'. They would be reincorporated to civilian life and even back in their own territories once educated. However, they would no longer own their lands, but would rather become part of a (subaltern) workforce; their 'normalisation' would entail the 'disarticulation' of their social structure and culture. According to reports, the rehabilitation of a race would be best carried out through control over childhood with a view to creating a 'new generation'.[56]

This repertoire is re-enacted in the film. On the one hand, the sequence fulfils an informative function by offering a convincing depiction of the missions' endeavours in the Amazon. This sequence also fills significant narrative gaps: it provides the spectator with a visual explanation for Manduca's scars and an elucidation regarding Karamakate's

childhood. However, its function goes well beyond this, serving to stage and subvert asymmetrical relations between the oppressed and their oppressors. The subversion is articulated through the characters of Karamakate and Manduca. When the friar states that the mission's aim is saving the souls of those children made orphans by the rubber war and rescuing them from 'cannibalism and ignorance', Karamakate, in a highly symbolic gesture, stands up and leaves the table. The camera foregrounds his rejection of the Eurocentric civilising discourse by framing his fierce body language and following him along the path that conducts him outside. Once there, he carries out an action of deculturalisation. He speaks to a group of children in their language, tells them about their origins and ancestors, and teaches them the names and functions of the plants as well as of the native rituals and mythology connected to them. He also reveals that he has suffered from similar experiences. This sequence displays several issues. Karamakate opposes the act of naming entailed in the work of colonial botany. He 'erases' colonial plant names, replacing them with the native ones; he also restores the original function of the plants. His action of deculturalisation opposes the forced acculturation practised by the missionaries.

Indeed, the film addresses the issue of cross-cultural interaction from the start. When they meet, Karamakate accuses Manduca and his people of surrendering to the whites; later, he accuses him of being a *caboclo*, of having lost his culture and serving the oppressor.[57] These Indigenous characters might seem to embody, rather schematically, two different approaches to cultural contact. In Karamakate's view, Manduca is a traitor to his original culture. Instead, Karamakate would embody Indigenous resistance to cultural, political and economic subjugation. He embodies Indigenous resistance when he tells the children in the mission: 'never forget who you are or where you come from' and 'do not let our song fade away'.[58] However, the film's ideology is not as simplistic as this might make it seem. Firstly, the character of Karamakate is more nuanced, as I argued above. Perhaps in a contradictory way, he embodies both culture preservation and the defence of the right of Indigenous people to incorporate change. After hearing the missionary abusively punishing the group of children, Manduca too carries out an act of resistance/rebellion by hitting the Capuchin. He and Karamakate free the children; however, since they need to continue their journey and the children might be killed by their peers loyal to the friar, Karamakate encourages them to escape. While this seems an act of liberation from oppression, the spectator knows that the children will most probably die since they are left alone in the jungle without their traditional knowledge or know-how; the awareness of the children's inevitable fate is rendered visually by the hesitance of the three characters. Hence, and secondly, the film offers no easy solutions for decolonisation but instead exposes a problem, namely how difficult it is to deal with processes of deculturation, acculturation, transculturation and culture preservation.

It is not by chance that the place of the mission is La Chorrera. La Chorrera, nowadays a town in the Amazonas department, was an important rubber station at the turn of the century. Roger Casement's *Amazon Journal* devotes a chapter to it. As it is now well known, the rubber trade in the Amazon was built on extremely violent abuse, torture and other violations of the native population. The main rubber company in the region was the Peruvian Amazon Rubber Company (later re-named Peruvian Amazon Company), which operated in the area of the Putumayo river in the Colombian southern borders, where La Chorrera was located. The company was directed by the Peruvian Julio César Arana, with a British Board of Directors. The North American W.E. Hardenburg was

among the first people to denounce the abuses, which he himself witnessed. His accusations eventually led the British government to send a commission of inquiry led by Roger Casement to investigate the abuses in 1910. The company subsequently closed down, in 1913. The film's cinematography highlights the link between La Chorrera and rubber exploitation: when the canoe reaches the area, a shot of a plaque alerts us to the historical significance of the place. The plaque reads: 'in recognition of the Colombian rubber pioneers who brought civilization to the land of cannibal savages and showed them the path of God and his holy church. Rafael Reyes. President of Colombia, August of 1907'.

The denunciation of the rubber industry's atrocities is also articulated in the character of a rubber victim who, having been grossly mutilated, implores Manduca to shoot him, which the latter eventually does. The plaques and the mutilated Indigenous body are, according to Pedro Adrian Zuluaga, alongside the marked rubber trees and the other scarred Indigenous bodies, examples of how the jungle is not depicted as a nature deprived of history but rather as a nature that has been 'intervened, written and re-written'.[59] The film highlights how such interventions have been carried out by, and in the name of, some of the pillars of colonial power – the church, the state and capitalism – through exploitation, torture and, especially, the creation of a culture of terror. Moreover, by symbolically uniting two different historical processes of violent oppression, the film seems to suggest that, as Michael Taussig notes in relation to the rubber trade, a culture of terror did not only function in the service of an immediate visible goal (rubber, Christianisation) but also, and more basically, hegemony of Western over non-Western subjects generally.[60]

Although *El abrazo* does engage with what Franco calls the 'ghostly recapitulation of the history of the Amazon itself',[61] it achieves an historically rigorous representation of the past through historiographical accuracy, a mise-en-scène that recreates realistically the original settings, the actors' performance and a serious and well-informed script.[62] Furthermore, it overcomes the risk of getting trapped in the denunciation of past exploitation and not inviting further inquiry into the present. An example of this is the link between *cauchería* and the character of Evan. The botanist's search for the *yakruna* is motivated less by what he claims to be his incapacity to dream and more by the American government's interest in the use of plants' properties for use in war. This plot element refers to the second rubber boom in the Amazon that took place during the Second World War. At that time, as a result of Japan's invasion of Malaysia, where most rubber plantations were, the rubber industry returned to the exploitation of the Amazon basin. Thus, the film expands the web of political actors involved in the exploitation of the Amazonian rainforest, inducing a reflection on the geopolitical role of the region that extends to the present day.

The sequences I have just discussed show how *El abrazo* stages postcolonial and (neo)-colonial encounters that 'decolonize the categories of Indian and native'.[63] The characterisation of the young Karamakate deconstructs the colonialist narrative of native people being inferior, lacking and backward savages. Similarly, the characterisation of the Western traveller/scientist undermines imperial images of the foreigner as master-of-land, explorer or cataloguer. The relationship between Karamakate and Theo can be read as an example of a reverse ethnography, in which the native no longer holds the position of the object of study but that of the subject; here, the native possesses the knowledge and all those attributes denied by imperialist discourses. Moreover, their relationship undermines the 'denial of coevalness' that, according to Fabian, has traditionally delineated anthropology's 'allochronic' discourse.[64] While anthropological 'objectifying'

discourse has relegated native 'others' to a previous, static and anachronistic time, portraying them as objects of observation, Karamakate, as noted above, is an interlocutor in a dialogical relationship. Furthermore, the film's focus on the encounter between ethnographer and native subject, rather than on the ethnographer's account of such an encounter, results in a depiction of the two subjects as existing simultaneously – as 'coeval'.

The decolonial act of deconstructing the category of race is one of the ways in which the film engages critically with the Eurocentric model of power that developed with the constitution of 'America', which Anibal Quijano has referred to as the 'coloniality of power'.[65] Race, understood as a technology of domination, has been one of its principal axes. 'Coloniality of power', as a concept, allows also a further reading of the implications of the scientists' position of lack and vulnerability in *El abrazo*, especially in the case of Evan. Through Evan's position of lack and dependence, the film opposes the other main axis of the Eurocentric system of power: capitalism, that is, the 'new structure of control of labour, its resources and products' which was established with colonisation.[66] Capitalism is represented in the story by the rubber trade, its global dimension being highlighted in Evan's search for the *yakruna* for corporate gain. Thus, the film is critiquing not only specific episodes of the historical exploitation of Amazonian people and land but also the structure of 'colonial/modern Eurocentred capitalism' and its racial organisation of work. If we take into account the sequences concerning rationality, technology and modernity discussed above and the use the film makes of Indigenous myths and cosmogony as well as notions of space and temporality (which inform the film narrative), we might say that the film is contesting the Eurocentric notion of Western modernity as an 'exclusively European experience' and calling into question the 'intersubjective and cultural relations' implied in the Eurocentric perspective.[67] The film opposes the Eurocentric hegemonic narrative of modernity by, on the one hand, exposing its technologies of domination, and, on the other hand, by displaying alternative systems of signification and organisation of the world. The critique of 'colonial/modern Eurocentred capitalism' is also an example of the inquiries into the present prompted by *El abrazo* since, as Quijano argues, 'what is termed globalization is the culmination of a process that began with the constitution of America and colonial modern Eurocentred capitalism as a new global power'.[68]

Intercultural dialogue

As pointed out at the beginning of this article, this film is not only about decolonial acts but also about intercultural dialogue and *interculturalidad*. In *El abrazo*, the natives are neither the objects of study nor of spectacle. The latter, if applicable at all, concerns the Western explorer. In the already mentioned episode with the native community, Theo and Manduca are framed as figures of entertainment for the natives: they dance and sing, provoking laughter. Despite this scene, however, the overall narrative cannot be said to operate as a 'reverse orientalism' or a 'victimology' that identifies Europe as the source of all evils.[69] The Western subject and Western culture are critiqued but not ridiculed. Both the young and the old Karamakate critique Westerners' concept of possession and private property, for example. In both stories, Karamakate accuses the scientist of bringing unnecessary luggage. The old Karamakate even throws some of it away. However, in both stories, this critique is juxtaposed with acts of culture contact and dialogue. In the first story, Theo's explanation of his material as the archive of knowledge and memory is not rejected by

Karamakate. In the second story, the shaman does not throw away Evan's treasured gramophone. Furthermore, the scene with the gramophone – although echoing previous cinematic representations – is another example of the cultural translation carried out by Karamakate to allow contact between two distant worldviews. Karamakate uses Evan's knowledge and sensibility in relation to music to teach him about dreams.

The relation between the native world and the Western world that the film seems to advocate is one of the coexistence and interaction of forms of knowledge. Although *El abrazo* engages very critically with colonialist and neo-colonialist intervention in the Colombian Amazon and with the Eurocentric system of power, it speaks more of dialogue between cultures than the vindication of an oppressed culture. The dialogical dimension is expressed both at plot and at form level. Regarding the former, the film finale is eloquent. When the old Karamakate and Evan reach the Cerros de Mavecure (Figure 3), they find that only one *yakruna* has survived and Karamakate appears recovering his memory and knowledge. While in his youth he had decided to destroy the *yakruna* to avoid further exploitation of his land by the whites, now his decision is to transfer his knowledge to Evan. In a symbolic scene, the shaman prepares the *caapi* and gives it to Evan, who enters into a hallucinatory trance state. This is the moment in the story when Evan receives the 'embrace of the serpent' that gives the film its title. The 'serpent' is the fictionalisation of the anaconda from an Amazonian creation myth, which is explained by Karamakate and is at the core of the film's story. According to Amazonian cosmology, the anaconda descended from the Milky Way to create human beings; it was then transformed into rivers and left the plants as gifts for the humans. Through the sacred plants, human beings can communicate with the 'original beings'; when this communication takes place, the serpent descends again and embraces the man.[70] Thus, the final 'embrace' symbolises the reception of native knowledge by the Westerner and, hence cultural cross-pollination. Evan's mental journey/spiritual experience is rendered through the psychedelic visual language that also evokes a historical interaction: the use of Indigenous plants by the Beat Generation, the psychedelic movement and the 1960s counter-culture, as the filmmaker has declared.

Figure 3. The old Karamakate and Evan – courtesy of Peccadillo Pictures.

In terms of form, this dialogic dimension is rendered through multiple points of focalisation. In the pre-title sequence, the camera positions the spectator in three key places, thus constructing a tripartite gaze. First, we are placed at river level, *within* the jungle. Second, we are placed behind Karamakate, seeing what he sees. Third, we are placed on the canoe, with (although we do not know it yet) the Western ethnographer and his Westernised native guide. The second and third camera positions show what I have called the dialogic dimension of the film. However, it is important to stress that while both focalisations are present, the Indigenous point of view is dominant in the narrative. This is achieved through the enactment of a 'performative' Indigenous voice,[71] the centrality of the native (language, characters, cosmogony and nature) at the plot and composition level, and via the overall ideology of condemnation of colonialism and deconstruction of Eurocentric discourses.

The third focalisation signals the role of Amazonian nature in the film. The spectator is immersed in the jungle even before its appearance on screen. Sound and cinematography challenge the dichotomy here/there that has defined visual and textual images of the jungle. Such a binary is also undermined by the positioning of the Western traveller. Both Theo and Evan already live in the jungle; they are familiar with it; they speak the native languages and even know, partially, the territory. In this way, the film does not allow easy identifications and complicates the motif of the Euro-American character as a mediating bridge between a Western audience and Indigenous characters. The intercultural dialogue represented and enacted in the film resonates with the notions of *interculturalidad* that have been advanced by Indigenous organisations in Latin America since the 1990s and are at the core of the current decolonial debate. As Robert Aman explains, *interculturalidad* has been interpreted by such organisations as 'respect for the diversity of indigenous peoples […], but also as a demand for unity in order to transform the present structures of society as imposed by colonialism'.[72] This notion has been given centrality in state discourses and policies such as those of Evo Morales in Bolivia. Aman proposes an important differentiation between *interculturalidad* (in Spanish) and interculturality (in English). The latter has dominated the discourses of cultural diversity proposed by bodies such as the EU and UNESCO. These institutions have used interculturality as either a tool to respond to the challenges brought about by multiculturalism since it fosters unity 'around universally shared values' (UNESCO) or a method through which states can 'promote social cohesion'.[73] Unlike interculturality, *interculturalidad* is a notion that comes from non-Western places and draws, on the one hand, on an understanding of culture as an 'ideological position' and, on the other, a commitment to decolonisation: 'Where indigenous movements target the colonially-imposed structure of society that has annulled and muted other languages and ways of being, the EU refers to interculturality as a political project' and 'identifies the conditions for interculturality in the cultural and linguistic heritage of the member states'.[74] It is clear, then, that the communication between different civilisations and cultures that takes place in the film and because of the film – framed by a critique of colonialism, colonial legacy and current Indigenous exploitations – certainly speaks more to *interculturalidad* than interculturality. As stated by a student interviewed by Amon, *interculturalidad* 'allows different indigenous cultures to view and interpret the world through the lens of their own beliefs in their own languages'.[75]

In her study on the visual depictions of tropicality, Nancy Leys Stepan describes how the tropics have been constructed in the Western imaginary as 'places of untamed nature, a nature pregnant with meaning, awaiting discovery, interpretation or exploitation', often characterised by the 'immensity of nature', 'transcendence' and as a 'primitive world'.[76] While what I have argued so far would lead one to think that the film challenges these graphic traits, in fact, the film handles them in a more complex manner. If *El abrazo* deconstructs many tropes of Eurocentric tropicality – the ineffability and savagery of inhabitant/jungle, the link between jungle, cannibalism and femininity, the jungle as a source of the Western traveller's self-edification[77] – others are not subverted. One example is the aesthetics of the sublime, which is re-formulated not only in the already discussed epigraph but also through the film's visual language. The extreme long shots and long shots of the canoe navigating the river and of the imposing Cerros de Mavecure, the aerial shots of the tropical vegetation as well as Karamakate's explanation of the multiplicity of borders of the river, all configure a landscape of enormity, limitlessness, extraordinariness and grandeur. Furthermore, Haydn's *The Creation* played on Evan's gramophone evokes the meanings of origin and transcendence that are associated with the rainforest landscape.[78] Such meaning is coupled with and reinforced in the myth of the anaconda. Yet, I would argue that this is not the dominant visual regime within the film. For the most part, in fact, the jungle is a territory in which the human subjects (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) move, which they inhabit, travel through and know. The camera work of long and medium shots renders a sense of adaptation and mediation between the human and the natural rather than one of (physical, conceptual and linguistic) impossibility. Furthermore, if the visualisation of the Amazonian landscape follows the codes of the Western aesthetics of the sublime, the feelings associated with it and the response that it aims to trigger in the spectator are not those of powerlessness or terror[79] typical of the sublime landscape (as is, instead, the case with the epigraph). Thus, Guerra's use of the sublime shares some characteristics of the 'decolonial sublime' as theorised by Walter Mignolo and Rolando Vazquez in the notion of 'decolonial aestheTics/aestheSis'. Like other examples of decolonial art, this film exposes 'the contradictions of coloniality' and its aim is to 'empower', 'not to produce feelings of beauty or sublimity, but ones of […] indignation, […] hope, and determination to change things in the future'.[80] Interestingly, however, Guerra's film is not a straightforward example of decolonial AestheSis; rather, it is a complex and multilayered artefact, a cinematic decolonial endeavour that speaks to and employs elements of different cultures, both Western and non-Western.

More controversial is the paratextual narrative that has been elaborated around this film. The film's making-of, the director's and crew's interviews and the *Caracol Television*'s documentary (cited at the beginning of this essay) have narrativised the film's shooting as a 'magical' and 'different' experience, thus problematically re-enacting the kind of exoticising primitivism that the film intends to – and indeed does – deconstruct.[81] Another problematic aspect of the film is the notion of indigeneity at play and the link between indigeneity and the past. As cultural anthropology and Indigenous practices have demonstrated in recent years, indigeneity has always been a 'complex emergence',[82] 'a set of relationships; […] not a fixed state of being';[83] but the extent to which *El abrazo* confronts the diversity of Indigenous societies and challenges essentialist notions are difficult to evaluate. While I have argued that the film stages different, even contradictory, postures regarding cultural contact, which indicate the heterogeneity of indigeneity, it

might also be argued that Indigenous people are represented as still 'bounded by place and [are] anachronistic'[84] or, at the very least, linked to the past, which evokes the Eurocentric evolutionist perspective, and that 'loss' as symbolised by the old Karamakate evokes a notion of 'authenticity', which is being contested by current Indigenous agents. The very placing of a story about Indigenous people in the past has been questioned by various scholars in relation to a variety of films.[85] In *El abrazo*, the use of the black and white would seem to further distance the story from the present. However, I contend that this device, in distancing the visualisation of the jungle from the audience's imagery of the contemporary Amazon, while certainly risking essentialising Indigenous culture, in fact, expands the realities with which its representation might resonate.

Conclusion

In her study on the cinematic representation of Native Americans, Michelle H. Raheja discusses how Indigenous filmmaking might be beneficial for Indigenous communities. One aspect stressed by her is that the on-screen existence of native subjects bestows 'visibility' on silenced voices and 'flag[s] a broader offscreen reality'.[86] Since films are representational practices that do not 'mirror reality but can enact important cultural work as […] art form[s] with ties to the world of everyday practices and the imaginative sphere of the possible',[87] it is crucial to assess what ideologies are mobilised by such visibility. Despite its problematic aspects, *El abrazo* succeeds in foregrounding Indigenous points of view and 'points of hearing',[88] challenging Eurocentric and colonialist politics of recognition and proposing a dialogic/intercultural means of cultural contact. While the film works with notions of indigeneity that only partially reflect the heterogeneous dynamics and reality of Indigenous cultures, it does challenge universalistic regimes of truth and power.[89] 'Reject[ing] the evolutionary epistemology that Universal History ha[s] popularized'[90] it undoes 'evolutionary viewpoints and recover[s] the historical local distinctiveness of marginalized groups'.[91] Even if such historical local distinctiveness is marked by European exploitation, and the film could certainly have been more audacious politically, it still offers a counter-hegemonic rewriting of encounters and a deconstruction of hegemonic representations.

El abrazo offers an example of what Raheja calls 'public pedagogy'.[92] As demonstrated in Guerra's statements, the film aims quite overtly to fill the lacunae in the 'historical consciousness of the nation'[93] and to challenge dominant historiographies and traditional sites of the Indigenous agency, in both political and cinematic arenas. In addition, it is relevant that the film stems from a relationship of collaboration with and respect for Indigenous communities. The pedagogical outlook that shapes Guerra's endeavour has been criticised by film critics such as Pedro Zuluaga for its producing an 'enumeration' of the issues the audience should know about.[94] Again, I would argue that its pedagogical aspect does not prevent the film from, as Zuluaga himself says, 'ask[ing] questions as well as offering answers'[95] and prompting inquiries into the past *and* into the present. *El abrazo*'s imagined 'Indians' 're-author themselves through the power of the word which […] is the power to name and change the world',[96] thus re-enacting in the fictional realm the achievements of the real Indigenous social activism that this quote addresses.

By way of conclusion, I would like to argue that *El abrazo* operates as cinematic 'cultural translation'. This concept usually refers to 'the ways in which cultures are

transported, transmitted, reinterpreted and realigned through local language' and to 'the realities of how individuals on both sides experience and interpret such encounters in the "contact zones" between different cultures'.[97] In using the notion of cultural translation, I refer to the ways in which this film mediates between different cultures, renders Indigenous culture cinematically and positions itself as a contact zone in which an encounter between cultures marked by historically unequal power positions may take place. Resonating with Homi Bhabha's reflection, translation here is less about languages and more about (other) cultural signs. Indeed, native languages are not translated into Western ones (except for the subtitles). *El abrazo* locates itself as a site of mediation in different ways. It represents a 'foreign' culture without domesticating it for a Western audience. At the same time, the film offers a 'comforting' rendering of otherness since Western audiences are not challenged through film experimentalism; rather, they are comforted by a film aesthetics that employs art-house elements but is in no way disruptive. Moreover, cultural translation is not here a discourse of power and appropriation as it has been in anthropology. We might understand it as an engaged and rigorous process of making a film about 'the other', a film which does not reproduce oppressive interventions and instead challenges the ways in which otherness has been historically constructed, which ultimately proposes a particular kind of 'intercultural cinema' – adapting Laura Marks' definition[98] – which is informed by and stages an interaction between different cultural regimes of knowledge, and manages to do so from its Western site of enunciation.

Notes

1. King John, López Ana M and Alvarado Manuel (eds), *Mediating Two Worlds. Cinematic Encounters in the Americas*, London: BFI Publishing, 1993.
2. Jean Franco, 'High-tech Primitivism. The representation of Tribal Societies in Feature Films', in *Mediating Two Worlds. Cinematic Encounters in the Americas*, J King, A M López and M Alvarado (eds), London: BFI Publishing, 1993, pp 81–94, p 82.
3. Franco, 'High-tech Primitivism. The representation of Tribal Societies in Feature Films', p 83.
4. Gilbert Helen and Gleghorn Charlotte (eds), *Recasting Commodity and Spectacle in the Indigenous Americas*, London: Institute for Advanced Study, 2014, p 4.
5. Marisol De la Cadena, 'Indigenous Cosmopolitics in the Andes: Conceptual Reflections beyond "Politics"', *Cultural Anthropology* 25(2), 2010, pp 334–370, p 336.
6. Marisol De la Cadena and Orin Starn (eds), *Indigenous Experience Today*, Oxford & NY: Berg, 2007, p 3.
7. Charlotte Gleghorn, 'Indigenous Filmmaking in Latin America', in *A Companion to Latin American Cinema*, M Delgado, S Hart and R Johnson (eds), Hoboken, NJ: John Wylie & Sons, 2017, pp 167–186, p 167.
8. In the description of an exhibition of indigenous art from Australia at Harvard Art Museums in 2016 for example, we read that:

   > Indigenous art is no longer positioned as 'other,' but as another form of contemporary art that demands our critical attention. This exhibition presents an opportunity to introduce audiences to the central role that Indigenous art plays in the global narrative of contemporary art.

9. This exhibition was held at the Sean Kelly Gallery in New York.
10. Randall Halle, '*Offering Tales They Want to Hear*: Transnational European Film Funding as Neo-Orientalism', in *Global art cinema: new theories and histories*, R Galt and K Schoonover (eds), NY: Oxford University Press, 2010, pp 303–319.

11. *Proimágenes Colombia* is a Colombian funding body, which administrates state funds such as the *Fondo para el Desarrollo Cinematográfico* aiming at fostering and consolidating Colombian cinematic production. It provided part of the initial funding for the making of *El abrazo*. See the documentary '*El abrazo de la serpiente*: una historia para el mundo', Bogotá: Caracol Televisión, 2016.
12. This and all translations are mine unless otherwise noted. The quotes from the film are from the English subtitles included in the DVD *Embrace of the Serpent*, (2015) [DVD] Colombia: Ciudad Lunar, Peccadillo Pictures, Caracol Televisión.
13. The young Karamakate is played by Nilbio Torres while the old Karamakate is played by Tafillama (Antonio Bolívar Salvador). The character of Manduca is played by Yauenkü Miguee (Miguel Dionisio Ramos).
14. Karamakate's position re-enacts the pose of an indigenous subject from one of the early twentieth-century photographs shown during the end credits.
15. The film's press notes include translations of the original text followed by the author's name and the date. The one in English reads:

    > In this moment, it is not possible for me to know, dear reader, if the infinite jungle has started on me the process that has taken many others that have ventured into these lands, to complete and irremediable insanity. If this is the case, 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 splendor; all I know is that, like all those who have shed the thick veil that blinded them, when I came back to my senses, I had become another man'. (Theodor Koch-Grünberg, 1907)

    Guerra has made use of Theodor Koch-Grünberg's published journals of his expeditions and collections of photographs/photogravures. Among Koch-Grünberg's main published works are *Indianertypen aus dem Amazonasgebiet nach eigenen Aufnahmen während seiner Reise in Brasilien* (1906) [Indian Types of the Amazon Basin], *Zwei Jahre unter den Indianern: Reisen in Nordwest-Brasilien 1903–1905* (1909) [Two years among the Indians. Travels in North-West Brazil] and *Vom Roroima zum Orinoco. Ergebnisse einer Reise in Nordbrasilien und Venezuela in den Jahren 1911–1913* (1916) [From Roroima to Orinoco].
16. See, for example, Peter Hulme, *Colonial Encounters. Europe and the Native Caribbean. 1492–1797*, London & New York: Methuen, 1986.
17. Quoted in Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions: the Wonder of the New World*, Chicago: the University of Chicago Press, p 132.
18. Nancy Stepan, *Picturing Tropical Nature*, London: Reaktion Books, 2001.
19. Wylie Lesley, *Colonial Tropes and Postcolonial Tricks. Rewriting the Tropics in the novela de la selva*, Liverpool: University of Liverpool Press, 2009.
20. Some of these works, such as Rivera's *The Vortex*, were used by Guerra in preparing the film, as the filmmaker has stated in interviews.
21. Alejo Carpentier, 'Lo barroco y lo real maravilloso', in *Los pasos recobrados: ensayos de teoría y crítica literaria*, A Carpentier (ed.), Caracas: Biblioteca Ayacucho, 2003, pp 83–84.
22. Wylie, *Colonial Tropes and Postcolonial Tricks*, p 9.
23. Stepan, *Picturing Tropical Nature*.
24. Alejo Carpentier, *El reino de este mundo*, Mexico DF: Iberoamericana de publicaciones, 1949.
25. Beatriz Pastor, *Discursos narrativos de la conquista: Mitificación y emergencia,* Hanover: Ediciones del Norte, 1988, p 26.
26. On the topic of the 'invention of Latin America', see also O'Gorman Edmundo, *The Invention of America*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1961.
27. Among the sources used by Columbus to construct his narrative discourse about the 'new' territories were: Pierre d'Ailly's *Imago Mundi*, Pliny's *Historia Natural*, Eneas Silvio's *Historia Rerum Ubique Gestarum* and a Latin version of 1485 Marco Polo's *The Travels*.
28. Evelina Guzauskyte, *Christopher Columbus's Naming in the 'Diarios' of the Four Voyages (1492–1504)*, Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2014, p 4.

29. Guzauskyte, *Christopher Columbus's Naming in the 'Diarios'* , p 4.
30. Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions*, p 57.
31. Johan Galtung (1967) quoted in Diane Lewis, 'Anthropology and Colonialism', *Current Anthropology* 14(5), 1973, pp 581–602, p 584.
32. Stepan, *Picturing Tropical Nature*, p 6.
33. Lewis, 'Anthropology and Colonialism', p 582.
34. See Anibal Quijano, 'Coloniality of power, Eurocentrism and Latin America', *Nepantla: Views from the South* 1(3), 2000, pp 533–580.
35. Shohat Ella and Stam Robert, *Unthinking Eurocentrism. Multiculturalism and the Media*, NY: Routledge, 1994, p 23.
36. Teresa De Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984.
37. Wylie, *Colonial Tropes and Postcolonial Tricks*, p 9.
38. Shohat, *Unthinking Eurocentrism. Multiculturalism and the Media*, pp 214–215.
39. The full exchange is 'Can the plant cure me?'/'Do my people still exist?'
40. See De la Cadena, 'Indigenous Cosmopolitics in the Andes: Conceptual Reflections beyond "Politics"'.
41. Mary Louise Pratt, 'Arts of the Contact Zone', *Profession*, 1991, pp 33–40, p 34.
42. Shohat, *Unthinking Eurocentrism. Multiculturalism and the Media*, pp 189–190.
43. Tafillama (Antonio Bolívar) played a crucial role in the translation and rewriting of the screenplay. He was the translator of the crew and taught the native languages to the foreign actors. See also http://www.elespectador.com/noticias/cultura/el-diccionario-de-lenguas-no-escritas-articulo-618566
44. See http://www.elespectador.com/noticias/cultura/el-diccionario-de-lenguas-no-escritas-articulo-618566
45. Quoted in Gleghorn, 'Indigenous Filmmaking in Latin America', p 182.
46. See Antonio Cornejo Polar, *Writing in the Air: Heterogeneity and the Persistence of Oral Tradition in Andean Literatures*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013.
47. See Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1983.
48. See Bataille Gretchen and Silet Charles, 'The Entertaining Anachronism: Indians in American Film', in *The Kaleidoscopic Lens: How Hollywood Views Ethnic Groups*, R Miller (ed), Englewood, NJ: Jerome S. Ozer, 1980.
49. See Guerra's interview at http://screenprism.com/insights/article/in-embrace-of-the-serpent-what-is-the-concept-of-the-chullachaqui
50. Gleghorn, 'Indigenous Filmmaking in Latin America', p 167.
51. Christopher Carter, 'Material Correspondences in Icíar Bollaín's *Even the Rain*: Ambiguities of Substance', *KB Journal* 11(2), 2016, w/p. Available at http://www.kbjournal.org/carter (accessed 15May 2017).
52. Oscar M Ardila, *La imposibilidad de la naturaleza. Arte y naturaleza en el arte colombiano*, Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Bogotá 95.
53. Quoted in José Roca, 'Alberto Baraya. Colombia, botany and classification; fake flowers and post-colonialism'. Available at https://frieze.com/article/alberto-baraya
54. Amada Carolina Pérez Benavides, 'Fotografía y misiones. Los informes de misión como performance civilizatorio', *Maguaré* 30(1), 2016, pp 103–139, p 107.
55. Pérez Benavides, 'Fotografía y misiones. Los informes de misión como performance civilizatorio', p 108.
56. Pérez Benavides, 'Fotografía y misiones. Los informes de misión como performance civilizatorio', p 110.
57. In Brazil, a 'Caboclo' is a person of mixed white and indigenous ancestry. The term refers also to culturally assimilated native subjects.
58. These words return in the end credits when we read that the film is dedicated to the people 'whose song we will not know'.
59. Pedro A Zuluaga, 'El abrazo de la serpiente, de Ciro Guerra: el texto de la selva'. Available http://pajareradelmedio.blogspot.co.uk/2015/05/el-abrazo-de-la-serpiente-de-ciro.html

60. See Michael Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man: a Study in Terror and Healing*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987. Taussig's work examines the culture of terror that informed the practices of rubber collection and trade in the Amazonian region and the role played by shamanism and shamans in the process and practices of healing (of colonists and indigenous people). It is worth noting that the link between terror and healing as well as the centrality of the shaman are two important elements of the film narrative too. In this film, as arguably in Taussig's books and many others, the shaman represents the 'voice' of the indigenous world.
61. Franco, 'High-tech Primitivism. The representation of Tribal Societies in Feature Films', p 85.
62. The film presents chronological and geographical inconsistencies, yet I maintain that they do not undermine the historiographic value of the fiction told.
63. De la Cadena (eds), *Indigenous Experience Today*, p 11.
64. See Fabian, *Time and the Other*.
65. See Quijano, 'Coloniality of power, Eurocentrism and Latin America'.
66. Quijano, 'Coloniality of power, Eurocentrism and Latin America', p 534.
67. Quijano, 'Coloniality of power, Eurocentrism and Latin America', p 542:

> That perspective imagined modernity and rationality as exclusively European products and experiences. From this point of view, intersubjective and cultural relations between Western Europe and the rest of the world were codified in a strong play of new categories: East-West, primitive-civilized, magic/mythic-scientific, irrational-rational, traditional-modern - Europe and not Europe.

68. Quijano, 'Coloniality of power, Eurocentrism and Latin America', p 533.
69. Shohat, *Unthinking Eurocentrism. Multiculturalism and the Media*, p 3.
70. This is explained by the director Ciro Guerra in an interview. See http://www.aarp.org/espanol/entretenimiento/expertos/anne-hoyt/info-2016/ciro-guerra-director-el-abrazo-de-la-serpiente-oscar-2016.1.html
71. See James Clifford, 'Varieties of Indigenous Experience: Diasporas, Homelands, Sovereignties', in *Indigenous Experience Today*, M De la Cadena and O Starn (eds), Oxford & NY: Berg, pp 197–224, p 198.
72. Robert Aman, 'Why Interculturalidad Is not Interculturality. Colonial Remains and Paradoxes in Translation Between Indigenous Social Movements and Supranational Bodies', *Cultural Studies* 29(2), 2015, pp 205–228, p 207.
73. Aman, 'Why Interculturalidad is not Interculturality', p 207.
74. Aman, 'Why Interculturalidad is not Interculturality', p 208.
75. Aman, 'Why Interculturalidad is not Interculturality', p 216.
76. Stepan, *Picturing Tropical Nature*, p 6.
77. Wylie, *Colonial Tropes and Postcolonial Tricks*, p 9.
78. A contemporary representation of the aesthetics of the sublime associated with the Amazonian landscape and the notion of genesis can be found in the work *Genesis* (2013) by Brazilian photographer Sebastião Salgado.
79. Malcolm Andrews, *Landscape and Western Art*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, pp 129–150.
80. Walter Mignolo, 'Decolonial Aesthetics/Aesthesis'. Available at: https://blackeuropebodypolitics.wordpress.com/decolonial/. See also Walter Mignolo, 'Decolonial AestheSis: Colonial Wounds/Decolonial Healings', *SocialText online*. Available at: https://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/decolonial-aesthesis-colonial-woundsdecolonial-healings/
81. In addition, the film's marketing campaign and advertising (which addressed a global audience) used images expressing the above-mentioned aesthetics of the sublime without the anti/decolonial element.
82. Clifford, 'Varieties of Indigenous Experience', p 198.
83. De la Cadena (eds), *Indigenous Experience Today*, p 11.
84. Gleghorn, 'Indigenous Filmmaking in Latin America', p 167.

85. See, for example, Franco and Shohat, Stam.
86. Michelle H Raheja, *Reservation Reelism: Redfacing, Visual Sovereignty and Representations of Native Americans in Film*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010, p xiii.
87. Raheja, *Reservation Reelism: Redfacing, Visual Sovereignty, and Representations of Native Americans in Film*, p xiii.
88. Shohat, *Unthinking Eurocentrism. Multiculturalism and the Media.*
89. Shohat, *Unthinking Eurocentrism. Multiculturalism and the Media.*
90. De la Cadena (eds), *Indigenous Experience Today*, p 6.
91. Clifford, 'Varieties of Indigenous Experience'.
92. Michelle H Raheja, '"Will making movies do the sheep any good?" The afterlife of Native American images', in *Recasting Commodity and Spectacle in the Indigenous Americas*, H Gilbert and C Gleghorn (eds), p 20.
93. Ilana D Luna, 'También la lluvia: Of coproductions and re-encounters, a re-vision of the colonial', in *Colonial Itineraries of Contemporary Mexico: Literary and Cultural Inquiries*, O Estradaand Nogar Anna (eds), Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2014, pp 190–210, p 192.
94. Pedro A Zuluaga, '¿Ciro, por qué no te callas?', blog entry on *Pajarera del medio*. Available at: https://pajareradelmedio.blogspot.co.uk/search?q=el+abrazo+de+la+serpiente
95. Zuluaga, 'El abrazo de la serpiente, de Ciro Guerra: el texto de la selva'.
96. Sara C Motta, '21st Century Emancipation: Pedagogies in and from the Margins', in *Power and Education: Contexts of Oppression and Opportunity*, A Kupfer (ed), New York: Palgrave, 2015, pp 169–193, p 172.
97. Robert JC Young, 'Cultural Translation as Hybridisation', *Trans-Humanities Journal* 5(1), 2012, pp 155–175, p 156.
98. Laura U Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2000.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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