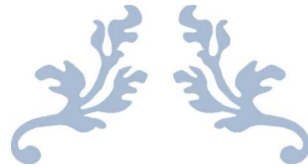


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# [A STUDY OF AYAHUASCA DOCUMENTARY FILM]

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## ABSTRACT

This master thesis invites the reader to acquire and examine new evidence about an emerging and growing sub-genre type of documentary film called Ayahuasca documentary. This study bases its definition of the Ayahuasca documentary sub-genre on a current work in the progress catalogue of over 50 documentary films, of which two of them selected as case studies. These films suggest that there is a growing cultural interest in plant medicine and ancient Amazonian knowledge in Western society, which leads to the aim of the study to define what Ayahuasca documentary film is, and find out about its function in Western society, and why that is important?

The design of the study used is of an exploratory qualitative methodology, with an interdisciplinary approach, within visual anthropology, cognitive science, neuroscience, social science and netnography. The gathered knowledge connected to the chosen films, *Ayahuasca Vine of The Soul* (2010) and *Aya-Awakenings* (2013), become the body source of the analysis, including an interview with Rak Razam, one of the directors.

Among the most relevant findings is that the Internet and the digital world have expanded the Ayahuasca culture for the past two decades, especially since the introduction of YouTube in 2005. In gaining consciousness, the Ayahuasca documentary film invites the spectator to reflect and learn about other realities and ancient cultural practices in a modern language. The documentaries call to see people who believe that this ancient knowledge would give us a better world and, for that reason, have gathered together to work with themselves, interdisciplinary and transnationally, which results indeed essential because it promotes peace and raises consciousness about our ecology.

**Keywords:** Ayahuasca, Documentary film, Interdisciplinary, Western society, Sub-genre, Vine of the Soul, Aya-Awakenings, Culture, Consciousness, Ancient knowledge.

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 BACKGROUND, AIM AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This master thesis invites the reader to acquire and examine new evidence about an emerging and growing sub-genre type of documentary film called Ayahuasca documentary, which originated in the early twenty-first century with the film *Shamans of the Amazon* (2001) by Dean Jeffreys. Jeffreys' non-fiction film about Ayahuasca and Shipibo culture in the Amazon marks the transition of the century. It not only changes technologically from video to digital (being the first and only ayahuasca documentary to be shot in video format to this author's knowledge) but also shifts from a material perspective to a search for spiritual connection. In other words, a search for re-connection to the planet, as there was once already a connection to the earth before religion would call it heresy, causing it to disappear due to the advances and politics of the Western civilisation. However, humans of the Amazon region have kept for thousands of years a secret science concerning the earth, a science of medicinal plants, a symbiosis between humans and the biosphere.

The ancestral wisdom of the Amazon is founded in the belief that the planet is a living organism and every living being in it matters, a narrative often expressed in many of the Ayahuasca documentaries by shamans and academics who experienced Ayahuasca. Dennis J. McKenna states this at the end of the documentary, *Ayahuasca Vine of the Soul*. He describes his encounter with Ayahuasca more intimately in the book, *Ayahuasca Reader, Encounters with the Amazon's Sacred Vine*.<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, the idea that the earth is a living organism has been developed by chemist

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<sup>1</sup> Luna, Luis Eduardo, and Steven F. White. 2016. *Ayahuasca reader: encounters with the Amazon's sacred vine*. London

James Lovelock, after James Hutton, the father of geology. Hutton maintained that geological and biological processes are interlinked. Lovelock's theory of Gaia asserts that all organisms and the rocks, the atmosphere, and the oceans are a tight and united entity, claiming that its evolution is a single process and not several separate processes. The earth as a living organism has as well origins by other early civilisations such as the ancient Greeks after the goddess Gaia, "Mother Earth"<sup>2</sup> or, as the Quechua people would call it, Pachamama.

This study bases its definition of the Ayahuasca documentary sub-genre on a current work in the progress catalogue of over 50 documentary films. These films are digital material, accessible not only at film festivals, or exclusive screenings. However, these documentary films are also available on various streaming sites such as YouTube, Netflix, Vimeo, Amazon, Gaia TV and so forth. The Ayahuasca documentary sub-genre has been through a selection of general traits found in 50 films ranging from short documentaries to features, with the intent to acquire a broader knowledge about Ayahuasca documentaries before further analysis.

It should be crucial to note that while this type of research is lacking within academic film studies up to the current date, there have been a number of investigations about Ayahuasca, also called the plant teacher in the Amazon, within neuroscience, cognitive psychology, and anthropology. Thus, this study suggests that there is a need for interdisciplinary research which would aid us to understand the impact Ayahuasca documentary has on Western society. According to my own findings, the number of research papers I have encountered about Ayahuasca in other academic disciplines is surprisingly more extensive than expected. The results in Google for Ayahuasca documentary film has 47,900 video hits, and the word "Ayahuasca" provides 8,660,000

<sup>2</sup> Wilson EO, Peter FM, editors. Biodiversity. Washington (DC): National Academies Press (US); 1988. Chapter 56, The Earth as a Living Organism. Available from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK219276/>

hits. I suggest that there is a growing social interest in plant medicine and ancient Amazonian knowledge, and because the documentary film as a format is expected to provide facts and real stories, the content of Ayahuasca film may indeed be a useful tool for information.

This also suggests that to know why these films are growing in number, one needs to understand what the Ayahuasca vine and brew are and the implication they have for the documentary format. Therefore, my research question is the following: What is Ayahuasca documentary film, what function does it have in the Western society, and why is that important? The intended method to answer the research question constitutes applying cognitive film theory, using knowledge from the previously mentioned disciplines, and briefly analysing the consciousness of two chosen film case studies. By consciousness, I refer to the potential ancient wisdom and experience that these films aim to transmit.

The two films are *Ayahuasca: Vine of the Soul* directed and produced in 2010 by filmmaker Richard Meech and *Aya: Awakenings* co-directed and produced in 2013 by Timothy Parish and Rak Razam; the latter is based on Rak Razam's autobiographical book, *Aya-awakenings: A Shamanic Odyssey*.<sup>3</sup> The two chosen case studies expose two aesthetically different styles of a documentary film that meet the criteria of Ayahuasca documentary because they both have *Ayahuasca* as one of their main protagonists. As the subject is rather vast, I am mainly focusing on these two films in the hope of outlining a base for possible future research within the field of similar non-fiction films.

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<sup>3</sup> [https://www.amazon.com/Aya-Awakenings-Shamanic-Rak-Razamebook/dp/B00DK71E82/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?dchild=1&keywords=Aya+awakenings+a+shamanic+odyssey&qid=1605714973&sr=8-1](https://www.amazon.com/Aya-Awakenings-Shamanic-Rak-Razamebook/dp/B00DK71E82/ref=sr_1_1?dchild=1&keywords=Aya+awakenings+a+shamanic+odyssey&qid=1605714973&sr=8-1)

## 1.2 DISPOSITION

The structure of the thesis consists of seven chapters, including the present chapter I, with the introduction where a background, aim and research questions are presented along with the disposition of the thesis. Chapter II presents the methodology applied and the presentation of the material. This section will explain the concept of Netnography, as this study relies a great deal in netnographic work. It will also be possible to learn a historical context of Ayahuasca in order to understand the following definition of Ayahuasca documentary film. By introducing a summary of Western interest in Amazonian culture, the reader will hopefully be more familiar to perceive the following general traits observed in the number of documentaries for this study. Finally, the delimitations and an introduction to the case studies will be presented. Chapter III contains a theoretical framework, presenting the diverse theoretical approaches and disciplines used, as well as an explanation for the chosen definition of consciousness in the thesis. In chapter IV, the author presents the plot summary, background, and analysis of the two case studies, *Ayahuasca: Vine of the Soul* (2010) and *Aya-Awakenings* (2013), where the triangle of communication is applied after Bill Nichols with an inspiring amalgamation following Catalin Brylla and Mette Kramer's cognitive study of documentary film in the studied netnographic reviews by the spectators. Chapter V presents the most relevant findings of the study followed by a discussion for each finding. The conclusion and further recommendations for research are presented in chapter VI. Subsequently, chapter VII presents the references.

## 2 METHOD AND PRESENTATION OF MATERIAL

The design of the study is of an exploratory qualitative methodology, with an interdisciplinary approach, since it best suits the research purpose of the study. The interdisciplinary approach is Ayahuasca documentary film. Part of the methodology applied in this thesis includes interdisciplinary readings within visual anthropology, cognitive science, neuroscience, and social science. The other part applies the concept of Netnography which is a compound of the Greek *ethnos* (people), and *graphy* (to write) that simplified, is a scientific practice that illustrates or provides writings about people on the *net* (Internet), for example, concerning their social and cultural life.

In this way, Netnography is a qualitative interpretive ethnographic research method used to study people's views and reactions on the Internet by examining interaction and communication through, for example, social media and how this influences and becomes influenced by the everyday life. According to the sociologist Martin Berg, Netnography could not only serve as a scientific method to perceive and understand the Internet as an artefact, medium and social space. But it can also offer to learn and map the social and cultural life that thrives on, with and concerning the Internet.<sup>4</sup> The term Netnography was first coined by Robert V. Kozinet who emphasises that this method explores general investigations of identity, social relations, learning and creativity, which is ideal for the study of social interactions and behaviour, online.<sup>5</sup>

The gathered knowledge connects to the content of the chosen films, *Ayahuasca Vine of The*

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<sup>4</sup> Berg, M 2015, *Netnografi : att forska om och med internet*, 1. uppl., Greppbar metod, Studentlitteratur, viewed 18 December 2020, <<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat07147a&AN=lub.4627752&site=eds-live&scope=site>>.

<sup>5</sup> Kozinets, Robert V. 2010. *Netnography : Doing Ethnographic Research Online*. SAGE.

*Soul* (2010) and *Aya-Awakenings* (2013), becoming the body source of the analysis. Consequently, Ayahuasca documentary films from diverse streaming channels such as YouTube, Netflix, Gaia TV, Vimeo, and IMDB (Internet Movie Database) have been gathered and listed in parallel with acquiring supporting literature, all of which has been arduous labour. Not to mention, my continued research following leads to Facebook pages, websites and research organisations, production companies, and filmmakers involved with the subject of Ayahuasca documentary film, science, and culture.

The empirical observations mentioned in section 2.4, Some General Traits, serve in determining a closer definition of the sub-genre of Ayahuasca documentary film, and it does matter because these films have been produced and distributed for almost 20 years with little or no academic interest in film studies. A possible reason for this might be that the substance of DMT is illegal in most Western societies. Kenneth W. Tupper explains how the growing interest in and the use of the Ayahuasca brew by modern non-native peoples poses as notable conceptual provocations concerning drugs and drug policies. He highlights the strong history of Ayahuasca use as a medicine, sacrament, plant teacher, and cultural constructions that do not immediately meet contemporary drug policy frames. Tupper's reflection requires an afterthought of some of the existential and sociological assumptions of current drug policies. He further explains that present drug laws and policies are ontologically prophesied on a mechanised view of the universe, as they are socio-political extensions of the modernist design of scientific materialism. According to this view, drugs and their effects can be entirely explained by the sciences of biochemistry and psychopharmacology.

However, Tupper makes a point, stating that a constructivist perspective (the acquired knowledge which is determined by the learner) acknowledges more than this and that drugs are powerful cultural constructs because their effects on human consciousness and conduct are functions not just of their biochemistry but also of the deep metaphorical and social meanings they

are granted. For example, the concept of 'medicine' is a cultural construct given meaning through the great institutions of medical practitioners and orders in modern Western society. Tupper exposes the conversation by stating that distinct substances are considered as medicines not via any properties implicit in them but by being endorsed by powerful professional groups such as pharmacists and physicians. He reminds that the substance Lysergic Acid Diethylamide (LSD) had this endorsement in the 1950s and early 1960s when it was recognised as a promising psychiatric medication. However, it was quickly banned when its non-medical use became headline news and a matter of ethical panic.

Another example Tupper provides is alcohol, which once was considered a medicine, and it still is ceremonially to some extent. However, in most societies, it is a recreational substance, exceptions being some Muslim states where it is considered a dangerous and prohibited drug. Furthermore, the phrase 'alcohol and drugs' emits a specific implicit ontological engagement that persists with the notion that alcohol is something more than a drug. Similarly, Ayahuasca defies the simplistic categorisation of being merely a drug or, as the terminology of the US National Institute of Drugs calls it, a drug of abuse. Tupper advises that, in fact, Ayahuasca has been and is culturally formed by its many users as medicine, sacrament, and master plant. In the Amazon, Ayahuasca is considered as a great master plant, both as a diagnostic means and a potent medicinal force along with tobacco. It is one of the essential substances in the pharmacopoeias of Amazonian healers.

According to Tupper, several legal cases have already opened doors and granted religious freedom to the ceremonial use of Ayahuasca in the West at such a rate that legislators would do well to consider other types of criminalisation tools to balance the competing interests of criminal justice, public health, and human rights. Tupper concludes that, concerning harm reduction theory, contemporary uses of Ayahuasca lend weight to the following notion of benefit maximisation.<sup>6</sup>

Having acknowledged that, it is, however, important to think in the here and now, by which I mean the 21<sup>st</sup> century. One must observe, acknowledge, take notes, and explore the sub-genre of Ayahuasca documentary film from a contemporary perspective using cognitive film theory and look to respond to our main research question: What is Ayahuasca documentary film, what function does Ayahuasca documentary film have in Western society, and why is that important? Through its findings, the research aims to illuminate the historical role Ayahuasca documentary film plays in Western society.

Furthermore, I have conducted an interview with Rak Razam, who is one of the chosen case study film directors of *Aya-Awakenings*. Initially, I wanted to do an interview with each film's director, but sadly, I discovered that Richard Meech, the director of *Ayahuasca Vine of the Soul*, passed away a couple of years ago.

## 2.1 A Historical Context, Before the Definition of Ayahuasca Documentary Film

The definition of Ayahuasca documentary film is hereby based on the observed general traits of the 50 catalogued Ayahuasca documentaries. However, first of all, it is important to acknowledge what Ayahuasca is, where it comes from, and what it does before the research continues to define the subgenre documentary film.

The name Ayahuasca (Aya-was-ka) comes from the Quechua language; *Aya* means spirit or dead person and *Huasca* means vine, usually translated as a vine of the spirits or vine of the dead. Ayahuasca is known to be a powerful plant indigenous to the Amazon. When Ayahuasca is cooked and reduced with other plants, for example, the Chacrana plant (which contains DMT, N, N dimethyltryptamine), it becomes a psychoactive brew.<sup>7</sup> The psychoactive brew is then drunk in a

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<sup>6</sup> Tupper, Kenneth W. 2008. "The Globalization of Ayahuasca: Harm Reduction or Benefit Maximization?" *International Journal of Drug Policy* 19 (4): 297–303. doi:10.1016/j.drugpo.2006.11.001.

<sup>7</sup> Apud, Ismael. 2017. "Science, Spirituality, and Ayahuasca: The Problem of Consciousness and Spiritual

ceremony led by a medicine man also known as a shaman in Western culture. According to the evidence in neuroscience, Ayahuasca enhances and alters consciousness and, through this, it is said to induce visions, intense emotion, and recollection of personal memories. It also enhances selfacceptance and beneficial mindfulness capacities. The evidence suggests that it has the capacity to treat various psychiatric disorders, working as an excellent tool for therapeutic treatment of depression and substance abuse.<sup>8</sup>

However, even though there are no risks ingesting Ayahuasca in a controlled setting if one is healthy, recent study results propose that bipolar or psychotic patients should not use Ayahuasca because of an increased risk of a manic switch or psychotic onset.<sup>9</sup> Although the science of the Amazon has been transmitted orally by generations for thousands of years, academic interest in Ayahuasca started in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by Richard Schulte, a Harvard ethnobotanist. Although, according to the historicity of Ayahuasca and Western contact, it leads to the earliest written accounts of Ayahuasca traced back to Jesuit missionaries in 1675, which covered a record of an ayahuasca ceremony. Historian José Chantre Herrera later compiled that account into a negative view of Ayahuasca in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, describing the native Amazonian as liars and sorcerers, according to Luna and White.<sup>10</sup>

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Ontologies in the Academy.” *Zygon* 52 (1): 100–123. <https://search-ebscohost-com.ludwig.lub.lu.se/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rft&AN=ATLAIBCB170331000122&site=eds-live&scope=site>

<sup>8</sup> Domínguez-Clavé, E., Soler, J., Elices, M., Pascual, J. C., Álvarez, E., la Fuente Revenga, de, M., ... Riba, J. (2016). Ayahuasca: Pharmacology, neuroscience and therapeutic potential. *Brain Research Bulletin*, 126(Part 1), 89–101. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.brainresbull.2016.03.002>.

<sup>9</sup> Orsolini, Laura, Stefania Chiappini, Duccio Papanti, Roberto Latini, Umberto Volpe, Michele Fornaro, Carmine Tomasetti, Federica Vellante, and Domenico De Berardis. “How Does Ayahuasca Work from a Psychiatric Perspective? Pros and Cons of the Entheogenic Therapy.” *Human Psychopharmacology: Clinical & Experimental* 35, no. 3 (May 2020): 1–17. doi:10.1002/hup.2728.

<sup>10</sup> Luna, Luis Eduardo, and Steven F. White. 2016. *Ayahuasca reader: encounters with the Amazon's sacred vine*. London Synergistic Press

However, further records lead to Richard Spruce who was a British botanist in the Victorian time and travelled around the Andes and the Amazon collecting specimens, sometimes without a permit from the authorities, thus dealing with confiscations. His gathered letters and notes confirm this in the book edited by Alfred Russel Wallace, which is available in two volumes and was first published in 1908.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, in the past decades, many Westerners have travelled there, seeking initiation by the Amazonian medicine men to become shamans themselves or to attend ceremonies and receive healing from the called mother plant or plant teacher. Westerners who have become shamans as well as academics have brought back the knowledge and traditions of these Amazonian plants to the West.

## 2.2 Definition of Ayahuasca-Documentary-Film

In order to define Ayahuasca documentary film, let us first obtain a closer understanding of what *documentary* is. Betsy A. McLane shows that, traditionally, the English language *documentary* starts with the American, Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North*, 1922. However, it was through a review of Flaherty's second film, *Moana*, 1926, in the *New York Sun* by John Grierson, when the launch of the word *documentary* as an adjective occurred (February 8, 1926) for the first time. Grierson states that the film had a 'documentary value'. McLane's view on it is that perhaps Grierson might have considered the French use of 'documentaire' to identify solemn ethnographic travelogues from other kinds of early film that emphasise mere picturesque scenes. Nonetheless, it is to say that *Documentary Film* has since slowly grown as an independent noun originally due to Grierson's efforts. Furthermore, a documentary has the word *document* in its

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<sup>11</sup> Spruce, Richard, and Alfred Russel Wallace. 1908. *Notes of a Botanist on the Amazon & Andes : Being Records of Travel on the Amazon and Its Tributaries, the Trombetas, Rio Negro, Uaupés, Casiquiari*. MacMillan.

<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat07147a&AN=lub.865894&site=eds-live&scope=site>. P.413-425

origin, which comes from the Latin word, *docere*, meaning to teach. Thus, in line with the Oxford English

Dictionary, *documentary*, means a 'lesson, an admonition, a warning', as late as 1800. On that note, McLain proposes that Grierson would have moved the term from his initial use, somewhat back to the earlier one of teaching and disseminating, using the 'documents' of modern life as elements to expand trust of social democracy.<sup>12</sup>

In *A New History of Documentary Film*, Betsy McLane provides further insight into the historicity of *Documentary* as an art form, being a technique and style that arose within motion pictures. McLane also reflects on the still photographic antecedents and analogues, for example, from the Civil War photographs of Mathew Brady, the photographic documentation of turn-of-the-century

New York City by Jacob Riis and the pictures made throughout the Depression years by Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, and others. Followed by *Documentary Radio* in the early thirties by the pioneering broadcasts of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), and considerably, with documentary television, becoming standardized.

In literature, the idea of *documentary* placed itself as the non-fiction novel and in newspaper journalism in the late 1960s and early 1970s as the 'new journalism'. More recently, reality shows and related productions have become well-known and somehow regarded as part of the documentary category. McLane suggests it to be an abused connotation, since not all reality shows are elements of truth that seek to expand faith in social democracy.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> McLane, Betsy A. 2012. *A New History of Documentary Film*. 2nd ed. Continuum. P.4-5,

<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat07147a&AN=lub.2978291&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

<sup>13</sup> McLane, Betsy A. 2012. *A New History of Documentary Film*. 2nd ed. Continuum. P.6

<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat07147a&AN=lub.2978291&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

Since it has now been established what Ayahuasca is and one has obtained a certain idea of the definition of documentary, let us further understand the definition of the documentary film after Bill Nichols' proposal of the triangle of communication. According to Nichols in *Introduction to Documentary*, a documentary film is about the intertwining of at least three stories: the filmmaker's, the film's, and the audience's. What Nichols proposes is that when one watches a film, one becomes conscious that the film comes from some place and someone. That means that there is a story about how and why the film was made, for the filmmaker, the film-character and the spectator, forming a triangle of communication between the three mentioned.<sup>14</sup>

The study of Ayahuasca documentary will pursue on the basis of these principles, following the triangle of communication of the filmmaker, the film-characters—which include the various protagonists—Ayahuasca being always one of them, and finally the spectator's story. This will be followed by the previous concepts and historicity of the *documentary* with the many meanings and connotations it has received. The reader should note that the *documentary* terminology, as used in the present study, views *Documentary Film* as elements of contemporary life that often seek to spread the faith of social democracy. This study also offers an introduction to the *Ayahuasca Documentary* as an emerging 'testimonial record' of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **2.3 Brief summary of Western interest in the Amazon from 19<sup>th</sup> century to the rise of the 21<sup>st</sup> century Ayahuasca documentary film**

One can argue that ethnographic documentary films have existed since *Nanook of the North* (1922) by Robert J. Flaherty. The film illustrates the trading, hunting, fishing, and migrations of a group barely touched by industrial technology. *Nanook of the North* is the first full-length anthropological documentary in cinematographic history.<sup>15</sup> It is difficult to trace back to films

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<sup>14</sup> Nichols, Bill. 2001. *Introduction to Documentary*. Indiana University Press. p. 61

depicting Amazonian culture or an Ayahuasca ceremony in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, as Ayahuasca was not properly studied in Western academia until the late 1950s. However, out of curiosity, I sought footage with the keyword “Amazon” at Pathé’s digital archive, as the word *Ayahuasca* gave zero results. I was able to find material from as early as 1911, which is not in great condition and nor is about Ayahuasca or Ayahuasca ceremonies, but about the Amazon’s fauna and flora. The footage is called *Tropic Matters* (1911) and is a 2.28-minute silent film by an unnamed journalist explorer.<sup>16</sup> However, some of the first still photographic evidence from the upper Amazon region traces back to a German explorer, Albert Frisch, who visited the region in 1867 and photographed the communities there, according to an article found on the BBC news site<sup>17</sup>.

Although interest for exploring exotic places such as the Amazon has always existed, there are no records of Ayahuasca in Western academia until Richard Evans Schultes (1915-2001), a Harvard Ethnobotanist who was awarded as the “Father of Modern Ethnobotany” by the Academy of Achievement in recognition of his dedication to the study of plant medicine by tribal societies.<sup>18</sup> Schultes’ research interest in the Amazon, and plant medicine in general, opened a new realm of discipline in ethnobotany in Western society. *Ethno* (as in ethnic) refers to people, culture, a culture’s collective body of beliefs, aesthetic, language, knowledge, and practice. *Botany* is the study of plants from the smallest blade of grass to the tallest or oldest tree.<sup>19</sup>

In more contemporary times, regarding Ayahuasca documentaries in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and its experiential exploration by Western culture, the earliest documentary found is *Shamans of the*

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<sup>15</sup> McLane, Betsy A. 2012. *A New History of Documentary Film*. 2nd ed. Continuum. P.4 <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat07147a&AN=lub.2978291&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.britishpathe.com/video/tropic-matters/query/amazon>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-49918451>

<sup>18</sup> The Academy of Achievement; Interview with Richard Evans Schultes, 1990 <https://achievement.org/achiever/richard-evans-schultes-ph-d/#interview>

<sup>19</sup> <http://botanicaldimensions.org/what-is-ethnobotany/>

*Amazon* (2001) by an Australian filmmaker, Dean Jeffreys, filmed from 1999 and released in 2001. The film is a crucial milestone for the subsequent Ayahuasca documentaries in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. At that time in history, there was no film like this one, which clearly explains to the Western audience what Ayahuasca is, where it comes from, and, most importantly, emphasising how great its healing properties are and what it can do to change the human consciousness of our time.

Among the scientists interviewed in the film, there is also a famous ethnobotanist, Terence McKenna, who openly shares his knowledge of medicinal plants and actively proclaims its health benefits.<sup>20</sup> In the early 1980s, McKenna became a prominent public speaker of psychedelics, wrote several books, and recorded cassette tapes about his experiences with and philosophies about Ayahuasca, among other medicinal plants and shrooms.<sup>21</sup> Terence and his brother, Dennis McKenna, also a well-known ethnobotanist, appear or are mentioned in many of the Ayahuasca documentaries of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

It appears that the so-called psychedelic movement, which spanned the 1950s and 1960s, including plant medicine not only LSD, have since been influencing our popular culture, not only artists, filmmakers, philosophers, and writers such as Carlos Castañeda and Aldous Huxley but also scientists such as Nobel Prize-winning biochemist, Dr Kary B. Mullis who, in the Ayahuasca documentary *Other Worlds* (2004) by French filmmaker Jan Kounen, explains that without the use of psychedelics, he is sure he would not have come to discover the PCR method, a genetic modifying technique for which he won a shared Nobel Prize in 1993.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Jeffreys, Dean, "Shamans of the Amazon", 2001. [https://www.imdb.com/title/tt3447748/?ref\\_=ttrel\\_rel\\_tt](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt3447748/?ref_=ttrel_rel_tt)

<sup>21</sup> Monteith, Andrew. 2016. "The Words of McKenna": Healing, Political Critique, and the Evolution of Psychonaut Religion since the 1960s Counterculture." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 84 (4): 1081–1109. doi:10.1093/jaarel/lfw010.

<sup>22</sup> Kounen, Jan; "Other Worlds" 2004. [https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0347718/?ref\\_=nv\\_sr\\_srsq\\_0](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0347718/?ref_=nv_sr_srsq_0)

## **2.4 Some General Traits of Ayahuasca Documentary Film**

This section presents a work in progress list, including some general traits observed from 50 short and feature documentary films found on the Internet. It is essential to note that the production of Ayahuasca documentaries is ongoing, and it is likely that, by the time this study is presented, there will be more films published. This is again proof that this emergent subgenre of documentary is indeed expanding.

This section is currently work in progress, as the academic study of Ayahuasca documentary film is novel, and there will seemingly be new layers to examine with time. That said, one needs to start somewhere, given that the scope of the study is still in its embryonic stage, nearly 20 years after the first film was released. Therefore, some illustrative reference is vital in order to enable further understanding of the definition of this new emergent type of documentary that demonstrates the Ayahuasca documentary subgenre. To sum up, these empirical general traits illustrate a cultural understanding that helps to define the Ayahuasca documentary. The current outline denotes observations, such as gender perspective, material origin, economic, social, and political orientation. Moreover, it addresses questions such as: Who is the film for and why? Representation of Western interest in ancient Amazonian knowledge, not only academic but also in popular culture. Following is a description of this author's first noted general observations:

- The plot of the Ayahuasca documentary is usually about a Westerner or a group of Westerners travelling to the Amazon to experience Ayahuasca ceremonies (sometimes the spectator follows them before, during, and after the experience).
- 9 out of 10 filmmakers and producers are men.
- Ayahuasca as an entity is always one of the main protagonists in the documentaries.
- The majority of the films are by filmmakers English native speakers or the films are made in

English.

- The messages in Ayahuasca documentary film often necessitate the spread of the ancient Amazonian worldview.
- There seems to be a political agenda regarding legacy and globalisation of Ayahuasca consumption.
- Criticism of Western materialism and ways of life and the need to reconnect to spirit.
- A demonstration that science and spirituality can be intertwined through testimonies of participants and scientists.
- Ayahuasca documentary filmmakers often use interviews or sound recordings with scientists and academicians to back up the evidence they share about Ayahuasca science and culture.
- There are no particular ‘modes’ that define these documentaries. Instead, they share mixed qualities that may be expository, poetic, participatory, observational, or performative.

## **2.5 Delimitations and Selection of Case Studies**

The present investigation started with a research that was conducted within Lund University’s databases with minimal result (a couple of film reviews containing the word Ayahuasca in them), probably because the subject of Ayahuasca documentary film as such has not previously been studied within film or media academia. Due to this, a delimitation is necessary, since the subject would be rather too vast to explore within the scope of other disciplines in the present study.

After the research confirmed a lack of study in the field of film and media history, the present study set out to explore the most popular and free-streaming channel there is today,

YouTube. It is there where one found the majority of Ayahuasca documentaries after a few days of surfing the

Internet. In an essay called *The YouTube Reader*, William Uricchio examines the mediality of YouTube as the future of 20<sup>th</sup>-century television. That the focus since the television show and film help to understand the central role, it has constructing meaning, associations of interest and structures of evaluation that are crucial for the cultural experience. Furthermore, Uricchio analyses the role YouTube plays in disrupting the monopoly of media industries as sole producers and ‘authorised conduits of interpretation, a kind of thinking that makes one believe that if it is on TV it must be true.’<sup>23</sup> As a result, his analysis leads YouTube to be viewed as a skilful contributor of media democratisation, where social meaning and cultural value are transforming continually.

The delimitation of the present study is reserved to mainly two cases studies. One of the case studies is *Ayahuasca Vine of the Soul*, which is available for free on YouTube. At the same time, *AyaAwakenings* can only be either rented or purchased on Vimeo or Amazon Prime Video. As the research was coming across diverse ayahuasca documentaries on YouTube, I realised that numerous personal testimonials of Western people who had participated in ayahuasca ceremonies were also available there. I found several testimonial articles about the Ayahuasca experience at Medium.com as well, which is a popular online publishing platform. It is crucial to note that the interest for the Ayahuasca experience is obvious in social media platforms, which gives an overview of the societal interest in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

To date, I have been able to document a list of 50 Ayahuasca documentaries that range from shorts to feature films. The purpose of collecting data on those documentaries is to get an idea of the number of films out there and to maintain a record of further studies on the subject. In the list of Ayahuasca documentary films I have encountered, I have noted the title of the film, name of the

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<sup>23</sup> *The YouTube Reader*. 2009. Mediehistoriskt Arkiv: 12. National Library of Sweden. P. 35-36

production company, filmmaker, nationality, language, year of production, where the material was found, which media channel aired it, and the duration of the material. I have also made notes about whether there was something particular about the film. For example, if a female producer or filmmaker was involved in its creation, as the standard for the majority of Ayahuasca documentaries is that they are either produced or directed by male filmmakers.

It needs to be emphasized that the purpose of collecting data on the 50 films is merely to gain a better, albeit, general, view of different types of Ayahuasca documentaries. The intention here is not to study the mentioned films as such but to highlight some of the common traits or, for that matter, specific differences that differentiate or distinguish the explored films in a novel way.

### **3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This section gives an overview of interdisciplinary research on the ayahuasca vine and brew. The section also elucidates the concepts of consciousness, cognitive science, and documentary film to reveal the function or functions of the Ayahuasca documentary film in Western society of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century through a cognitive perspective. Having understood the function or functions that Ayahuasca documentary has in Western society, this study will provide answers to why that documentary might be important at all.

#### **3.1 Studying Ayahuasca Documentary through Interdisciplinarity**

There are previous interdisciplinary studies of Ayahuasca in other disciplines, such as cognitive psychology, neuroscience, and social anthropology to mention a few. The purpose of selecting the following studies for the overview is to provide the missing knowledge that connects the dots between Ayahuasca studies in the above-mentioned disciplines with film and media history.

The study of the literature on Ayahuasca vine and brew from the perspectives of various disciplines, along with a look at the interests, issues, and results of these studies, gleans many insights into the function(s) of the documentary in society. In this research, the reason for applying the definition of consciousness is to emphasise experience or *having an experience*, which is referred to in Annaka Harris' book, *Conscious: A Brief Guide to the Fundamental Mystery of the Mind*, where she says that consciousness is itself an experience itself.<sup>24</sup> These insights or knowledge that academia evolves through every study is itself consciousness—a consciousness that grows and evolves through generations in space and time.

In this way, cognitive science asserts that by examining the mind scientifically, one does not just seek to create explanations that allow us to predict visible behaviour. Thus, one also wants these stories to be general and to use as few explanatory concepts as possible. The main interest of cognitive science is in how individuals can see the world and create actions, as well as how they operate to understand each other in the world. Cognitive science suggests that the processes designed to secure these ideas are as explicit as possible. Furthermore, it implies that the mind is modular because one has different organs for seeing and hearing, indicating that the mind may consist of many unique mechanisms tuned to perform various tasks. In summary, cognitive science is the interdisciplinary scientific discipline that studies the mind as an information processing system.<sup>25</sup>

But what does history teach us regarding the conscious study of emotions? Emotions and their study have mostly been believed to be a waste of time. At the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Charles

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<sup>24</sup> Harris, Annaka, *Conscious: A Brief Guide to the Fundamental Mystery of the Mind*. (First ed., Harper, an imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers, 2019)  
<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat07147a&AN=lub.6292659&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

<sup>25</sup> *Cognitive Science: An Introduction*. 1996. Blackwell.  
<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat07147a&AN=lub.987758&site=eds-live&scope=site>. P.4; P.370.

Darwin, William James, and Sigmund Freud presented significantly distinct viewpoints through their writings on emotion and placed emotion in a place of privilege in scientific discourse. However, throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and until quite recently, both neuroscience and cognitive science coldshouldered emotion. The ideas of Darwin, James, and Freud about the brain were, of necessity, slightly imprecise. However, one of their contemporaries, John Hughlings Jackson, took the first step towards presenting possible neuroanatomy of emotion. He suggested that, probably, it was the right cerebral hemisphere of humans that predominantly deals with emotion while the dominant role of the left cerebral hemisphere was in the realm of language.

Throughout most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, science did not trust the study of emotions. Science considered emotion too personal, intangible, and unintelligible. The emotion was at the opposite end of the cognitive spectrum from reason, the most outstanding human ability. The reasoning ability was presumed to be entirely independent of emotion. The idealistic view of humanity placed emotion in the body and reason in the brain. In the end, not only was emotion not rational but even studying it was probably irrational, according to Antonio Damasio.<sup>26</sup>

History tells that emotions and any study of cognitivism are outliers. However, recent studies tell a different story. Since the 1990s, cognitive science, and thus cognitive film theory, have generated new ideas looking to understand the (previously neglected) cognitive-emotional side of disciplines which are individually interconnected. If a function of the emerging Ayahuasca documentary sub-genre reflects a side of society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which includes scholars in various disciplines eager to further explore new dimensions beyond the visual and rational into the emotional and cognitive, it would suggest that *having an experience* is indeed evolutionary.

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<sup>26</sup> Damasio, Antonio R., *The Feeling of What Happens : Body, Emotion and the Making of Consciousness*. (New ed., Vintage, 2000). <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat07147a&AN=lub.1591635&site=edslive&scope=site>

A general point in cognitive science is that the goals we have in mind determine our thinking and practical actions.<sup>27</sup> The goal of the Ayahuasca documentary seems to be to educate, inform, illuminate or spread ancient Amazonian knowledge re-discovered by diverse disciplines in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The present research considers cognitive film theory as a pillar that supports understanding any social goal or impact that documentary film or audio-visual images can in general offer. In other words, cognitive science is the integration of interdisciplinary developments arising from the effort to understand the mind and the brain. This is why applying cognitive film theory will help not only in understanding the documentary film, its production, and the intention of the Ayahuasca filmmaker in 21<sup>st</sup>-century society, but the perceived ideas and images projected by the filmmaker for the spectator through his/her creation documentary will also serve as a perspective of the maker's emotional compass.

Therefore, studying cognitive film theory in Western society with this 21<sup>st</sup> century documentary film can potentially be the latest study of contemporary human emotions and also answer why such a study might be essential. Thus, it is only natural that any research in cognitive film theory and with the alleged social impact that Ayahuasca documentary film might create as its subject matter will tend towards Antonio Damasio's averment, 'At its most complex and elaborate level, consciousness helps us develop a concern for other-selves and improve the art of life'.<sup>28</sup> It appears that helping to develop a concern for other-selves and improving the art of life is what the Ayahuasca documentary aims to do when studying them more closely, as will be seen in the next chapter with the two case studies.

Since the study of Ayahuasca documentary film is interdisciplinary research and the documentary is related to ayahuasca vine and its brew, a study of the latter is an essential

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<sup>27</sup> *Cognitive Science: An Introduction*, (Blackwell, 1996.). <https://search-ebscohostcom.ludwig.lub.lu.se/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat07147a&AN=lub.987758&site=eds-live&scope=site>. P.2

<sup>28</sup> Damasio, 5

preparatory step for further study of the documentary. Stephan V. Beyer, a multidisciplinary scholar, presents an insightful introduction to ayahuasca vine and the brew by summarising eight interdisciplinary presentations made at the 13<sup>th</sup> annual conference of the Society for the Anthropology of Consciousness (SAC) in March 2010, which was published in the special Ayahuasca issue of the journal *Anthropology of Consciousness*. According to Beyer, it was a ground-breaking session which resulted in a meeting of the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelics Studies (MAPS) in the following month.

Beyer said that there were scholars and researchers from a wide variety of disciplines realizing that they belong to the same ‘energetic community’. Their overlapping interests mutually illuminated their different approaches and a common commitment to rigorous and creative research. Beyer also declares that the publication of the book, *Ayahuasca Visions* by Eduardo de Luna and Pablo Amaringo in 1991 had a significant cultural influence outside the Amazon. Besides, Beyer presents a striking anthropological history by raising awareness of Allen Ginsberg’s and William S. Burroughs’ Ayahuasca reference to the ‘Yage letters’ from 1963 and other ground-breaking publications by Marlene Dobkin de Rios in 1972 and Luna himself in 1986 as well as to the inauguration of a Santo Daime Centre in Boston in 1987.

However, it was in the 1990s that Beyer confirmed that the foreign researchers sought Ayahuasca in the Amazon. Beyer highlights that by the time the SAC conference took place in 2010, Ayahuasca had two faces in the popular media and on social networks. On the one hand, it was healing and transformative, and on the other, the word ayahuasca had become comparable with the sharp, transgressive, and sternly trendy. At this time, more and more foreigners travelled to the upper Amazon to seek out shamans who would give them ayahuasca, and stories of extraordinary healings began to accumulate.

In his multidisciplinary summary, Beyer observes that before the influence of international therapeutic models and expectations, Ayahuasca was not itself a medicinal cure but rather a diagnostic tool. Shamans and their patients drank ayahuasca to get information, not to heal. This is also acknowledged by Guillermo Arevalo, a well-known shaman that appears in several ayahuasca documentaries as well as in *Ayahuasca: Vine of the Soul*, and, according to Beyer, Westerners had similar expectations of the healing effect of ayahuasca that were not what the mestizos and indigenous shamans were accustomed to expecting. This in itself gives a hint that the effect of consuming and participating in ayahuasca ceremonies have possibly different outcomes for Westerners than the natives. I suggest that the different perspectives of the outcomes might have to do with the slight differences between the existential issues as seen by the foreigners and the natives.

Beyer refers to a study by anthropologist Michael Winkelman. The latter, in 2005, interviewed fifteen ayahuasca tourists in Manaus and found that they were seeking spiritual relations, personal development, emotional healing, and access to more profound levels of the Self. These ‘seekers’ were looking for a connection with nature through ancient transformational rituals and jungle shamanism. Emotional healing, which is a major issue in the Western community, is a term that often shows up in the ayahuasca documentary. Thus, Beyer asserts that by 2010, the time had come for a rigorous examination and a multidisciplinary approach to the cultural context, nature, effects, and uses of the ayahuasca drink. Furthermore, I suggest that it is about time now, in the year 2020, to launch academic research in the Ayahuasca documentary film, as it is necessary to deepen and update the knowledge within a larger umbrella of Ayahuasca studies.

Beyer’s analytical summary of the eight papers presented in the SAC conference provides information about not just how the ayahuasca is used and experienced in different cultures, but it

also mentions one particular scholar, Richard Doyle, a researcher of history and rhetoric of emerging technoscience. Doyle offers a biosemiotics interpretation of the ayahuasca experience as an ultimate product of a meeting between plant and human intelligence.<sup>29</sup> This interpretation resonates with something often brought up in the Ayahuasca documentary where the characters in the film refer to ayahuasca as an intelligence bigger than oneself. Other references are to the mother or the grandmother entities, a grand intelligent female energy. Therefore, if the ayahuasca vine and the ayahuasca brew contain plant intelligence, as some claim, is the plant intelligence communicating with human minds as alleged by several characters in the documentary and the scholars themselves in the Ayahuasca documentary format?

Before attempting to draw any answers, which will be presented in the conclusion, let us first view a study conducted by a group of scientists, resulting in the psychological effect of the ayahuasca brew, showing that it reduces judgemental processing and inner reactivity, which are classic goals of mindfulness psychotherapy. Another observed psychological outcome of the use of ayahuasca is enhancing creative divergent thinking and psychological flexibility by allowing individuals to generate new and effective cognitive, emotional, and behavioural strategies. The methodology of the study was to visit two spiritual ayahuasca workshops, inviting the participants to conduct creativity tests before and when the effects of ayahuasca were acute. The study concludes that ayahuasca enhances creative divergent thinking and increases psychological flexibility, which, according to the authors, may facilitate psychotherapeutic interventions and support clinical trial initiatives.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Beyer, Stephan V., 'Special Ayahuasca Issue Introduction: Toward a Multidisciplinary Approach to Ayahuasca Studies', *Anthropology of Consciousness* 23, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 1–5. doi:10.1111/j.1556-3537.2012.01053.x.

<sup>30</sup> Kuypers, K., J. Riba, M. de la Fuente Revenga, S. Barker, E. Theunissen, and J. Ramaekers, "Ayahuasca Enhances Creative Divergent Thinking While Decreasing Conventional Convergent Thinking." *Psychopharmacology*, 233 (18) (2000), 3395–3403. doi:10.1007/s00213-016-43778.

One could consider that there is an intelligence-producing positive result for the participants either by the ayahuasca vine or as co-creation of man. That is a function in itself – the knowledge in a particular discipline generating expanded consciousness by its results and, thereby, further knowledge. In the chapter, Ayahuasca Analogs in *Plants of the Gods* by Richard Schultes, Jonathan Ott, a chemist, writes in the same vein:

*Psychonautic pharmahuasca research is so distant from the scientific mainstream that it took nearly three decades of no one supporting, or independent scientists doing 'underground' research before the enzyme inhibitor theory of Ayahuasca pharmacology was put to the test. Paradoxically, this research can rightfully claim that it stands exactly in the center of the research on the biochemistry of consciousness and the genetics of pathological brain functions!... Ayahuasca research is not just on the vertex of neuroscientific research, but it is possible that the reversible MAO-inhibiting effects of Ayahuasca could present a practical, less toxic alternative to the harmful substances that are finding medical use!*<sup>31</sup>

*The Ayahuasca Analogues* further reveal that our ancestors found, in many places and at many times, the connection to reconcile human suffering in ecstatic entheogenic practices. A reconciliation between the civilised intellect that separates each human being from other creatures and also one human from another.<sup>32</sup>

### 3.2 Cultural Context and Interdisciplinary Studies of Ayahuasca

The present study has so far presented the interdisciplinary studies of Ayahuasca. However, it is important to note that when relating Ayahuasca documentary to cognitive film theory, as far as this author's knowledge extends, this is the first study of its kind.

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<sup>31</sup> Schultes, Richard Evans, Christian Rätsch, and Albert Hofmann. 2001, *Plants of the Gods: Their Sacred, Healing, and Hallucinogenic Powers*. (Rev. and expanded ed. Healing Arts Press), P.137

<sup>32</sup> Schultes, Richard Evans, Christian Rätsch, and Albert Hofmann, *Plants of the Gods: Their Sacred, Healing, and Hallucinogenic Powers*. (Rev. and expanded ed. Healing Arts Press, 2001), P.137

Here, the mental representation is fundamental to the notion of cognitive science that “our capacity to think, feel, communicate and act arises because of our capacity to *process* symbols. A symbol may designate information from the senses.”<sup>33</sup> On that note, it is useful to enter into the world of neurology to which David MacDougall refers in *The Looking Machine*. He states that neurological investigations have proposed that specific cells in the brain allow us to ride and thus temporarily adopt the point of view of other persons. This not only helps to create empathy for others but can also, in some circumstances, generate physical sensations in us that mirror theirs.<sup>34</sup>

The Ayahuasca documentary often shows experts sharing their professional or personal opinions on their experiences with Ayahuasca. In that respect, Catalin Brylla and Mette Kramer suggest that a cognitive method can clarify the idea, creation, exhibition, and reception of documentaries by examining the intra-/extra-textuality, whereby filmmaking methods and sociocultural traditions mediate the indexical link between representations and their real-life equivalents. The authors indicate that the intercommunication between these levels of examination makes documentaries potentially more significant than fiction films in terms of our perception and interaction with the real world. What the authors mean is that real-life association and the assumption that documentaries make factual assertions are the core of documentary spectatorship and, thereby, for the social impact.<sup>35</sup>

The potential empathy, mental representation, and the social impact that Ayahuasca documentary film brings to its spectators meet the above reasoning. It resonates with the idea that emotional engagement is often a key strategy adopted by filmmakers who want to achieve a

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<sup>33</sup> Cognitive Science : An Introduction. 1996. Blackwell. <https://search-ebscohostcom.ludwig.lub.lu.se/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat07147a&AN=lub.987758&site=eds-live&scope=site>. P.8-9

<sup>34</sup> MacDougall, David, *The Looking Machine : Essays on Cinema, Anthropology and Documentary Filmmaking. Anthropology, Creative Practice and Ethnography*, (Manchester University Press 2019). <https://search-ebscohostcom.ludwig.lub.lu.se/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat07147a&AN=lub.6394812&site=eds-live&scope=site>. P.70

<sup>35</sup> Brylla, Catalin, and Mette Kramer, ‘A Pragmatic Framework for the Cognitive Study of Documentary’, *Projections* 12, (2) (Winter. 2018), 159–180. <https://search-proquest-com.ludwig.lub.lu.se/docview/2220697151?accountid=12187> (accessed July 15, 2020).

particular social impact. The mental representation projected by a documentary is reinforced by the documentary's maker by having scholars or experts share their professional or personal inputs.

In *The Feeling of What Happens*, Antonio Damasio states that 'the most revealing fact is that consciousness and emotion are not separable. It is usually the case that when consciousness is impaired, so is emotion.'<sup>36</sup> Considering that most Western academics have until the recent decades cold-shouldered cognitive studies and assumed that emotion belongs to the body and not the brain, it opens the line of thinking that a range of the collective knowledge has been kept in darkness and Western society has lived on rational and materialistic principles and lost touch with their spirituality and emotions. The Western way of life finds a recurrent reference in the Ayahuasca documentary where the message to the spectator is that Western culture has been spiritually depraved for hundreds of years and that it has reached its peak of depravity. Therefore, the time has come to expand the collective consciousness, get out of our comfort zone, and see with the heart rather than only with the rational intellect to benefit individually and globally.

Another message observed and instilled in the subtext of the Ayahuasca documentary is that it evokes a sense of a holistic worldview. A longing for nature, self-knowledge, and for living in harmony with the planet, which serves as a function of unveiling new perspectives of contemporary cognitive behaviour. In *Ayahuasca: Vine of the Soul*, the two main protagonists are ordinary people who willingly aspire to break away from their everyday lifestyles in search of something more profound. Their action demonstrates that anyone willing to try a new ayahuasca experience can do so, one need not be a scholar studying Ayahuasca. However, it also hints that contemporary Western citizens are changing their habits of thinking and acting upon alternative treatments. The

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<sup>36</sup> Damasio, 16

number of personal testimonies and growing interest in plant medicine reveals that through the documentaries.

According to Catalin Brylla and Mette Kramer in *A pragmatic framework for the cognitive study of the documentary*, there has been little intersection between cognitive film theory and documentary studies. They propose a research framework consisting of four areas of interest: 1) mediation of realities, 2) character engagement, 3) emotion and embodied experience, and 4) documentary practice. In this, Brylla and Kramer follow Bill Nichols' triangle of communication as illustrated below:

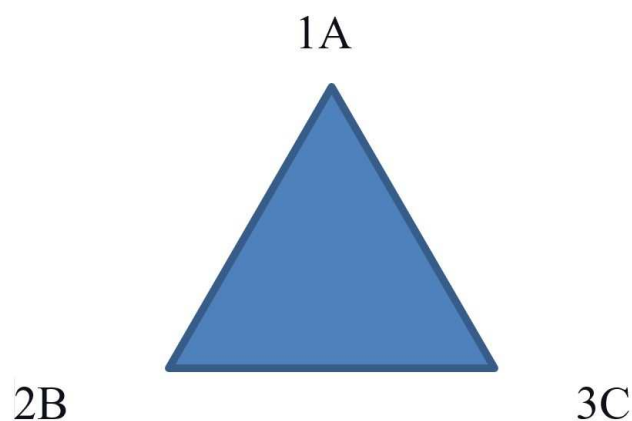


Figure 1: 1A-Filmmaker (mediation of realities & documentary practice), 2B-Film subject (character engagement), and 3C-Spectator (emotion and embodied experience).<sup>37</sup>

The above-mentioned triangle of communication serves as a complement to the cognitive embarkation on film analysis.<sup>38</sup> Brylla and Kramer also suggest that documentary film studies

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<sup>37</sup> Brylla, Catalin, and Mette Kramer. 2018. A pragmatic framework for the cognitive study of documentary. *Projections* 12, (2) (Winter): 159-180, <https://search-proquest-com.ludwig.lub.lu.se/docview/2220697151?accountid=12187> (accessed July 15, 2020). <sup>38</sup> Nichols, Bill. 2001. *Introduction to Documentary*. Indiana University Press. p. 61

necessitate a mixed strategy of merging samples, concepts, and systems from different disciplines, which is the methodical inspiration applied in this study. Continuously, Bill Nichols, in the prologue of the book, *Cognitive Theory and Documentary Film*, reaffirms that cognitive theory contributes to our understanding of the process by which one finds, evaluates, embodies, leading our actions from depictions, documentaries and others, that one finds. Curiously, Nichols also adds that wisdom contributes to the long term of our society, if not our civilization. From this perspective, cognitive theory reinforces the approach on issues that concern particular knowledge and composition of the documentary from a film-making aspect.<sup>38</sup>

## 4 CASE STUDIES

### 4.1 Ayahuasca Vine of the Soul

#### 4.1.1 Background and Plot summary

*Ayahuasca: Vine of the soul* is a Canadian documentary of 2010 by Richard Meech. The film is a three-time winner at the Columbus International Film and Video Festival (Silver Chris award), the Worldfest Houston International film festival (Silver Remi Award), and Los Angeles Awareness Film Festival (Special Jury Prize). The documentary follows three protagonists, Rob, a media accountant, Kirstie, a naturopath and Ayahuasca, the Amazonian vine. Rob and Kirstie are on their way to the Peruvian jungle to meet with an international team that will also participate in the following retreat with Ayahuasca ceremonies among other medicinal plants. Their physical journey ends in a deeply emotional and transformational journey.

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<sup>38</sup> *Cognitive Theory and Documentary Film*. 2018. Palgrave Macmillan.

<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat07147a&AN=lub.5337056&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

The rest of the selected cast constitutes a shaman, Guillermo Arevalo, who runs the retreat centre, a Canadian shaman apprentice, Dave, and three different types of experts among other secondary participants. The scientists in the film are all well-renowned, a medical doctor specialising in addiction issues, Gabor Maté, an ethnobotanist Dennis J Mckenna, and an adjunct professor of the

University of British Columbia School of Population and Public Health, Kenneth Tupper.<sup>39</sup>

#### 4.1.2 Analysis

The documentary begins with footage from a ceremony where close-up images of faces and eyes through a nocturnal lens are visible to the spectator. A male shamanic chanting is heard in the background accompanied by a tune of insects, birds, and jungle activity. Images of the jungle intertwine with moderate quick interviewees who state their personal experiences with Ayahuasca.

Immediately, in the background, Meech's narrative voice reaffirms the following:

**Voiceover by Richard Meech:** The source of the experience, of which these people speak it is not a faith, a belief in things unseen. It is simply this (images of a big boiling pot cooking Ayahuasca in the jungle) a herbal brew made in the jungles of Peru by native shamans. They call it Ayahuasca, which means vine of the soul.

Until this point, there is suspense building in the narrative. For those interested in the Amazon or anthropology, it might be persuasive, and they should stay tuned for more. For others, it might merely be one of many documentaries, and they can decide to change the channel. However, because of the format, Ayahuasca documentaries are usually not in broadcast television but are

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<sup>39</sup> <https://vineofthesoul.com/the-film/>

available in streaming services such as Netflix or YouTube, which usually means that one is interested in the subject or about the subject before selecting to view.

Richard Meech introduces the film cast, the documentary's background, and his intention to the spectator in the first seven minutes of the film. His methodology of informing the spectator constitutes the use of scientific points of view mixed with testimonials and personal experiences by scholars and other protagonists in their professional capacity and through their personal emotional journey. Meech is audacious with words, such as in editing statements to convey his mediation of realities within his documentary practice. Right after introducing the Ayahuasca brew, Meech presents two sets of problematisation in the narrative. One is the globalisation and legality of Ayahuasca beyond the Amazon. Kenneth Tupper, who has written a book about the globalisation of Ayahuasca, states the following in the film:

**Kenneth Tupper:** The globalisation of Ayahuasca is a challenge for modern drug control authorities. The people who are using it outside of their traditional context, are not the criminal elements that are associated traditionally with illegal drug use- these are people like my parents, my friends, doctors, lawyers, people in the health field, who are passing along knowledge word of mouth. And it seems to be spreading.

After that, Meech, in a voice-over, states for the spectator that 'in the last ten years, thousands have tried ayahuasca seeking healing and spiritual growth.' Here, he is referring to the second problematisation concerning the lack of spirituality and emotional connection in Western society. Meech emphasises it through Dennis J McKenna's statement followed by Gabor Maté's statement further below:

**Dennis J McKenna:** The notion that there is a spiritual component to healing, has been totally excised from biomedicine. Spirituality and healing? What does spirituality have to do with healing? (ironically)

Moreover, the image of a foggy street with solitary parked cars and trees on each side are visible. Followed by a medium shot of tree branches tilting upwards towards the sky as Maté Gabor begins to talk before the next shot. His image appears, stating the following:

**Gabor Maté:** We live in a culture that is spiritually very deprived, very empty. We live in a culture that is very materialistic; in other words, we live in a culture that does not give human beings what they really need. That leaves a huge hole in people.

Let us consider the above comments by McKenna and Maté and the earlier-mentioned evidence and beliefs regarding human history about emotion and the lack of interest in studying it among the 'knowledgeable'. It explains why it is unsurprising that people, in general, have not yet fully understood the depth of its importance. It also has, as a consequence, left the masses dealing with a massive hole, as Maté states in his analogy of Western society. A massive hole of knowledge and lack of spirituality might be the result of centuries in a materialistic and emotionally indifferent society. That could also explain why biomedicine has lost its spiritual component. For a long time, the world of humans has been materialistic, and happiness, therefore, is measured in material wealth. Most humans, particularly in Western countries, appear to have lost the connection with nature and, consequently, the connection with themselves and the earth.

Rob's intention in going to the jungle and trying Ayahuasca is that he is approaching middle age and needs to re-evaluate his beliefs. Kirstie declares that she wants to try Ayahuasca for herself before she can recommend it to her patients. However, three months after the ceremonies, Kirstie admits that she has come to realise that her decision of trying Ayahuasca was, in fact, only for her and not work. She had only been afraid to admit it because of people's judgement.

It seems that Meech's emphasis on that particular detail about Kirstie's realisation as to why she had wanted to try the ayahuasca experience might seem insignificant at first. However, it is an essential element for the viewer to analyse. This is notable for the viewer who might have biases about substances illegal in Western society (even though these substances are legal in their country of origin and practice). The mediation of realities by Meech is to create awareness of the possible prejudice of viewers—a mediation of reality identifying either with Kirstie or with the people who

potentially judge her. Kirstie's realisation shared with the filmmaker and the filmmaker sharing it with the spectator provides a sense of trust. Meech chooses to present that piece of private information towards the end of the documentary not only for narrative reasons but also to wrap up and consolidate any character engagement that the spectator might have felt for Kirstie at the beginning of the documentary.

By portraying the film character, Kirstie, like any of us, with flaws and strengths, Meech reminds the spectator of Kirstie's humanity and thereby produces character engagement through selfrecognition. Meech creates that intimacy by using shots of Kirstie's apartment and her private life and by returning to close-ups of Kirstie's face. Kirstie tells how and why she had felt defensive when being questioned about going to the jungle to try psychotropics.

There are also general comments by spectators sharing their insights about the film on two different YouTube channels. However, the following comment was directly about Kirstie's emotional response when Kirstie was having a difficult time in ceremony and Dave, the apprentice shaman, helped to soothe her 'bad trip' by chanting and performing reiki (a healing technique) on her.

Following is Dusty Welsh's reply on Francisco Correa's channel:



[Dusty Welsh2 years ago](#)

At [36:47](#) minutes I just started balling crying like a child because I know what she was going thru and I know what he did to help her face her demons and chase them away so she could better heal. This video has had a deep impact on me. Thank you.

Another comment related to Kirstie was found in the Collective Awareness channel on YouTube related to Kirstie and her ego issues.



[Nejka Reiki practitioner2 years ago \(edited\)](#)

Amazing stuff indeed! ❤️ The blond woman was having trouble due to her ego attached to much on material and science as she said her self..it seems she couldn't let go of control and just go with the flow. That's why I wasn't even surprised that happened what it did !

Both comments show self-identification by the viewer and emotion and embodied experience by two different female users. One is humble and grateful, as the impact on the film, as she describes, has been 'deep'. The second user is not surprised that Kirstie went through a difficult time, considering Kirstie did not want to lose control of her ego, thus, the user gives the impression that she had expected that Kirstie's difficult ceremony would end as it did.

The rest of the commentary differs in both channels from liking or loving the film in general to using the platform for self-advertisement, random comments, or asking users for advice on finding ayahuasca retreats. However, below is an interesting conversation between four users in the thread on Francisco Correa's channel. It starts by a user commenting a critique on the pharmaceutical industry, and the conversation develops, ending in the following comments:



[Allen Lichner2 years ago \(edited\)](#)

Thanks so much for sharing this video. IT IS WELL DONE I believe the only reason this stuff is illegal is because it would destroy the big pharma companies and their bottom line. It would eliminate the need for all the anti depressant and anxiety medications which only make money and help very few. It would cause the field of psychiatry to finally admit that they are over paid quacks who cannot do what nature can. Millions would benefit from a simple plant and there would be no need to prescribe all their drugs. Drugs which only mask symptoms. Mental health is a huge problem. This medication would help solve the problem cheap and effectively and put an end to the multi billion dollar psychiatric industry which has only succeeded in making money by keeping people drugged. The fact this is a schedule one drug and conducting tests with it is illegal is proof that it works. Not one case of ayahuasca causing physical harm has ever been reported in the thousands of years its use. I personally know many people whose lives have been devastated by psychiatric medications yet they hand the drugs out like candy at halloween.

[https://www.bccresearch.com/pressroom/phm/globalmarket-mental-health-drugs-worth-\\$88.3-billion-2015](https://www.bccresearch.com/pressroom/phm/globalmarket-mental-health-drugs-worth-$88.3-billion-2015)

Read more

10

REPLY

Hide reply



[ILaOriental1](#) 1 year ago

Allen Lichner Yes, exactly. However it's much more than big Pharma being threatened. It's our whole system. Think about our rampant consumerism, the insatiable lust for profits,(hello Wall Street bankers)poverty, war, surveillance/police state... What will happen? I don't know, but Ayahuasca is telling us something and we need to listen.

REPLY



[Allen Lichner](#) 2 years ago

The world would be a better place if the governments of the world just left people alone. WOULDNT IT BE COOL IF EVERY ONE IN CONGRESS AND SENATE TOOK THIS STUFF AND THEN CREATED OUR LAWS. that would be the ultimate.

11

REPLY

Hide 2 replies



[L S1](#) 1 year ago

Allen Lichner I've always said this, this is what the Donald Trumps of the world need to take. We don't need wars we need Ayahuasca!!

2

REPLY



[Awakken47010](#) 10 months ago holy

shit can you imagine

The above conversation touches upon serious problems in Western society of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which are mental health, climate change (consumerism/exploitation of natural resources) and surveillance of citizens (power/politics). It provides evidence to the function or functions of not only documentary film in general but also to the particular function(s) that involve the themes around Ayahuasca and its potential impact on Western society.

Having established the relationship between the filmmaker, the film character, and the viewer through the filmmaker's mediation of realities and film practice as well by the character engagement through the film character and emotion and the embodied experience by the spectator above, the research wishes to further analyse that particular intimate sequence between Meech and Kirstie when she is crying and recounting what had happened during the ceremony the previous night.

Meech uses footage from the night before, showing Kirstie in her worse state indeed, crawling on the floor as she was too weak to walk. Images of Kirstie laying down and Dave, the apprentice shaman, performing healing on her confirm the story of the night before. Meech gets Dave to recount the story from his point of view:

**Dave:** She is lost in this big vast sea. So, I'm there to throw her a line in a way because she has getting drown in her experience. I'm there to find her path and find a way that she got there. Through the chanting find her and bring her back in her body and back with her connection and the healing will start to happen on its own process.

CUT to Kirstie's point of view:

**Kirstie:** If that isn't the most humbling thing (begins to sob) I have ever done. (drying tears from face) I hope my ego just stays away and leaves me alone. It's too hard, I don't want to deal with it.

Close up image of Kirstie with eyes closed, from the ceremony the night before.

**Kirstie:** And Dave said, you go to Guillermo (the shaman).

Image back to Kirstie telling her experience from the night before.

**Kirstie:** Can I crawl? (referring to the direction from Dave, to go to Guillermo) So I dragged myself. (Images of Kirstie crawling towards Guillermo)

**Kirstie:** He addressed my issues at multiple different levels through Icaros, through chanting.

Image from the night before, Guillermo is chanting as he sits on the floor in front of Kirstie

**Voice over by Kirstie above the images:** Oh I was so grateful because they did not let me go until I was able to go if they passed me down the chain and I just cried and cried because I thought, this insane level of gratitude. I don't even have words for it. I felt this, a kind of love I don't think I've ever felt in my life. It was not from here.

In the following, Rob is also interviewed by Meech to add his perspective regarding Kirstie's difficult event from the night before. By sharing the connection between Rob and Kirstie, Meech yet again, creates an intimate space and the triangle of communication is activated and vibrant.

**Rob:** I would turn slowly and just kind of let her know I was there (Rob begins to sob and melancholic music plays in the background) but that's all you can do. You can't verbalize that sort of thing. I let her know I was aware of what she was going through.

**Kirstie:** Because we were sort of bonding, he was close to me. Sometimes his bald head was like (making noises of approximation) so if I would not know him, I would be like, dude go have your party like three feet to the side. What are you doing? (giggling) But I was comfortable with Rob's presence. He was awesome, he was there the whole time.

That sequence is special mainly because of two reasons: one is that the relationship between Rob and Kirstie grows for the spectator. Seeing Rob sob when he is trying to share Kirstie's experience from his point of view is very touching. Not often does one see men sob openly. And the second reason is that Meech, by getting the viewer to know how difficult Kirstie's experience had been, not just from her accounts but from Dave's and Rob's accounts, shows how much affection the film characters genuinely have for each other creating a powerful embodied experience in the viewer. As previously referred to by David MacDougal in *The Looking Machine*, specific cells in the brain allow us to temporarily adopt the point of view of other persons, creating empathy for others. Moreover, in some circumstances, it can generate physical sensations in us that mirror theirs, as is the case with YouTube commentator Dusty Welsh where she points out: "I just started balling crying like a child because I know what she was going thru..."

With respect to the triangle of communication by Nichols and the cognitive method by Brylla and Kramer, *Ayahuasca Vine of The Soul* succeeds in using the components from the filmmaker mediating realities of the two protagonists with the introduction of Ayahuasca to the Western society. At the same time, the character engagement and the film characters appearing ordinary at first truly elucidates the intention of the maker, which is that each person realizes the importance of working on oneself. Not to forget the responses of users who have taken time to think, feel, and communicate after having assimilated the mental representations of the documentary.

Finally, *Ayahuasca: Vine of the Soul* characterises within the Ayahuasca documentary genre the symbolic portrayal of Westerners travelling to the Amazon to encounter the ayahuasca experience and, as a result, obtaining a transformational perception to consciousness, the planet, and human existence. The perception of the ayahuasca experience is transmitted through an emotional and psychological transformation in the characters that reflects the previously-mentioned issues problematised by Meech and exemplified by Maté and Mckenna in the film. In that problematisation, the film asks the spectator to reflect upon Western culture, to truly reflect upon what is there for the individual holistically and spiritually.

Regarding exemplification, Rob and Kirstie are excellent representations of 21<sup>st</sup> century male/female Western-cosmopolitan individuals who thrive at work and live alone. However, something is missing. It does not imply that they might miss a partner per se since they live alone but rather an existential connection. Rob, towards the end of the film, shares his reflections with Meech and the spectator. Some of his reflection pertains to the significance of family. The spectator gets to see how Rob reconnects to his brother, who for reasons unknown was previously disconnected. In a closer analysis, towards the final segment with Rob, Meech illustrates the side effects of our individualistic Western society, side effects that are causing a gap in human relations

because of how individuals of the Western society learn to mind their own business. That, in the long term, might end in humans losing touch with those that matter.

Rob and Kirstie sought the ayahuasca experience because they wanted to expand their consciousness. Rob wanted to re-evaluate his values and beliefs; he lacked something and what is astonishing in all of it is that he realised that he needed to connect with his brother. Kirstie wanted to work on herself, which is a modern connotation. To work on oneself means to improve or restore one's persona. As a result, she found that she needed to release control of herself since she was using her rationality more than her emotions, consequently losing touch with her vulnerability.

Meech contributes to the documentary subgenre of Ayahuasca by configuring feelings, emotions, imagination, and a real narrative for the role of wisdom. The documentary draws the viewer from beginning to end through the skilful use of music, images, and editing rhythm that creates visual and embodiment harmony. Wisdom is transcendent through the film embedded in the words spoken by the film characters at different stages. Meech captures and assembles the triangle of communication in the production, with Mckenna's last words towards the end of the film declaring that the planet's biosphere is communicating with humans through Ayahuasca and inviting us to stop acting like monkeys. It is implicit that this is because we humans are often working greedily, killing for territory, and causing disorder and destruction. Although perhaps monkeys are more connected to nature than humans are, philosophically, Mckenna is attempting to convey the earth's wisdom message through the documentary, which Meech is helping to enforce if one keeps an open mind.

## **4.2 Aya-Awakenings**

### **4.2.1 Background**

*Aya-Awakenings* is an Australian documentary film of 2013, which is co-produced and directed by Timothy Parish and Rak Razam, and is based on Razam's previous book,

*Ayaawakenings: A Shamanic Odyssey*. The documentary is only available for rent or purchase on Vimeo and Amazon Prime. In an interview from early 2020, Razam tells that the story begins with an experiential journalistic journey when he travelled to Peru in 2006 to write a 3000-word article for an Australian magazine. The story was to be about Ayahuasca and the thriving business of hallucinogenic shamanism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, the article ended up as a book because of the extensive material Razam had gathered. Thereafter, the book transformed into moving images, and a documentary film was born.

It took three years to adapt the book into a documentary format. Part of the process of adaptation consisted of the gathering audio and video footage to complement the chosen original text from the book. The book has 30 chapters but, because of the documentary format, only six of these chapters, in adapted form, would make the final cut. Razam recounts that all of the dialogues in the documentary, which are the building block from every scene, is directly lifted from the book – so, essentially, the documentary is the cleanest transmission from his raw experiences in the jungle in

Peru in 2006, turning these into a media format and transmitting them to an audience.<sup>40</sup>

#### **4.2.2 Plot Summary and Analysis**

*Aya-awakenings* begins with a visual quote: ‘For all those seeds the vine has touched and for those yet to awaken...’ This provides a poetic subtext to the rest of the film and also denotes its intention, which is to intrigue and awaken curiosity in the viewer. The text then fades into black to the sound of an active jungle. It continues with a three-minute presentation of the production companies, the collaborators involved, and, finally, who the story is written and narrated by. The title of the first chapter appears in text, ‘Seekers’ followed by an establishing text indicating where

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<sup>40</sup> Transcript from audio-recorded interview with Rak Razam on 2020/04/02

the story begins: Lima Airport, Peru, Wednesday, June 28<sup>th</sup>, 2006, and Razam begins to narrate his story like a poetic radio drama.

The documentary is about Rak Razam's journey to Peru, encountering the ayahuasca experience for the first time. It is very clear that the documentary is about Razam's exploratory inner journey related to his own uniquely subjective reactions concerning the mediated reality he portrays about Ayahuasca. His own subjective reaction being one from a Westerner's point of view who does not know much about the Ayahuasca culture at the point of arrival but is hungry to learn and evolve.

According to Razam, he and Parish wanted to share a point of view, which is very atypical in the documentary genre in the Hollywood narrative. Razam recounts that it is less about the facts and more about an emotional download, the feeling of what is happening. They wanted to convey what a psychedelic experience is about. Below is an extract of the interview about the topic:

**Razam:** We incorporated the Icaros, the magical songs of the shamans of Peru, the vibrational imprint of what they sing in the ceremony. Combining the written words, sound, visuals, intentions, especial effects we created a platform where not to talk about ayahuasca, but to recreate the experience. Many people who have had the experience can recognize themselves and love it, others who have seen the film on video on demand might think the film is shit because it is a different realm, they have not experienced it themselves.

The documentary is indeed a creative collaboration between Parish and Razam, providing a unique aesthetic style among other ayahuasca documentaries because it incorporates stimulating multimedia. *Aya-awakenings* offers a poetic, participatory and performative style where Razam is actively using a voice-over over a number of still and moving images of himself throughout the entire film, providing a reconstruction of his journey back in 2006. His narrative provides historical background about Ayahuasca, which is another protagonist in the story together with Kevin Furnas, an American anthropologist, among others. It seems that Furnas inspires Razam further into his spiritual growth, which can be *experienced* at the end of the documentary.

In his narrative, Razam proceeds to inform about the social situation being changed in the Amazon due to commercialization and the Western interest in the ayahuasca experience:

**Voiceover by Razam:** Indigenous shamanism has quickly become the most profitable business in town and numerous lodgers and retreats have sprung up across South America to cater to the influx of rich tourists. This is split over onto the Internet, there are hundreds of ayahuasca websites, chatrooms and forums that have emerged to crystalize a global subculture engaging within the indigenous spiritual practice and seeding it back to the western world.

Sound of Tibetan bowl and the screen fades out in white:

**Voiceover by Razam:** And here I was a thirty-six-year-old freelance journalist reporting on an academic style gathering with a pronounced twist. It was all about Amazonian shamanism with the hands-on component. With its entrepreneurial blend of spirituality and capitalism, the second Amazonian shaman conference may be the perfect mix of paradigms. It builds itself as a gathering of curanderos, scientists, and interested members of the public who have a yearning for indigenous spirituality.

The above insightful statements from *Aya-Awakenings* reveal that *having an experience* indeed grows and evolves through generations in space and time into the evolutionary. By evolution, it is suggested here that how the wisdom of medicinal plants and ways of living have managed to endure and flourish through generations in the Amazon. Thus, how that wisdom now transitions from oral media and physical interaction to digital media and digital interaction, from ancient Amazonian culture to modern Western culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Thus, Razam's story and description of the Shamanic conference attended in 2006 also establishes an evolutionary and historical encounter between the old Amazonian spiritual wisdom with the contemporary Western academia and capitalistic interest. Furthermore, it also indicates an exchange of cultural knowledge, raising questions of concern about Razam regarding cultural appropriation of the indigenous people by a couple of readers and one reviewer of the DVD version.

These concerns show criticism at the Amazon online platform. Moreover, since the book's content is the core of the documentary, *AyaAwakenings*, it is relevant for the researcher to look at these top critical comments stating the following:



o sol

[2.0 out of 5 stars](#) intensely jargonistic jingo journalism

Reviewed in the United States on January 15, 2015

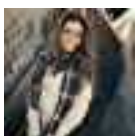
The first thing i found was it was hard to get beyond the wordy sensationalism that permeates through the whole experience of this film. its like Rak Razaam is trying to hype up interest in an ancient and sacred medicine practice for his own personal glory, although I'm sure he would claim he is doing the world some great favor by this overblown promotional exercise.

there are some nice visuals and production tricks here, and if you are looking for the wow factor you might find it. if you feel touched by the sacred beauty and immense wisdom of ayahuasca and its healing properties, I would avoid this, as I feel that ayahuasca is most honoured through silent wisdom and personal experience. i feel this diminishes the ayahuasca expereince by turning it into a hyped up marketing campaign to promote Raks version of himself as some kind of spiritual journalist. the film doesnt impress with knowledge or understanding, and often skims the surface with grandiose language and self-glorification.

there is also i feel a lack of sonic depth in the way that the word ayahuasca is repetitively mispronounced and shows another lack of awareness in the importance of sound in the use of indigenous language, even the title is a chopped up version of a word that has magical properties in its proper use.

if you want a dense poetic monologue and can handle the self indulgence of the story and intention you might have some fun here. im sure a lot of people will say "oh yeah me too" when they hear of some of these experiences. the danger is that many people will just wanna join the bandwagon get their ayahuasca fix on the way to burning man so they can be part of the cool crew and trendy shamanic revival that Rak repeats ad nauseam. This talk of shamanism and enlightenment is misleading especially coming from those who so obviously have barely touched the surface of such a profound subject matter before they go off galavanting round the planet in a tirade of clever new age journalistic jargon, as a self proclaimed expert on a topic that is, in reality beyond human comprehension and in my opinion best honored through sacred silence and humble participation. the real shamans have done many years training in the jungle, if you want to really understand what is happening with ayahuasca and the spiritual realms it can lead to, you are much better off finding a real shaman you can trust and leaving behind sensational western motifs.

7 people found this helpful



JL

[2.0 out of 5 stars ... of hype and an attempt to make ayahuasca seem fun, glamorous](#) Reviewed in the United States on February 10, 2015

It's a lot of hype and an attempt to make ayahuasca seem fun, glamorous, and thrilling, but the book lacks soul. There does not seem to be an honest reverence for what ayahuasca is used for by the native people (for healing only), but instead a focus on tripping out on ayahuasca and how cool it is to travel to a foreign country to do so. It also is apparently a good way for the author to promote his ayahuasca tours, which he leads in Peru. 1 people found this helpful



Ephraim S Casper

[2.0 out of 5 stars it's OK at best](#)

Reviewed in the United States on February 23, 2014

I was reading this while down in peru drinking the spirit vine for months and this book is unimpressive. it is an expanded piece form something he was set to (or did) write for playboy Australia, and his writing is of that caliber, which is to say, a bad attempt at "gonzo". the content is at times interesting (aya itself I am in awe of) but incredibly self indulgent and proud. although he does show some interesting components of the modern aya movement, it is donr in "whirlwind tour" kind of way and its just way too surface. watch jan kounen's "other worlds" instead.

9 people found this helpful.<sup>41</sup>

The comment above by O Sol states a few interesting points. The first one claims that the entire film is an overblown promotional exercise with wordy sensationalism. Secondly, although admitting that there are some nice visuals in the film, O Sol considers that the sacred beauty and wisdom of Ayahuasca would preferably be honoured by silent wisdom and personal experience. The third point is that the commentator *feels* that the film diminishes the ayahuasca experience by being turned up into a hyped marketing campaign to promote Razam's version of himself as a spiritual journalist.

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<sup>41</sup> [https://www.amazon.com/Aya-Awakenings-Shamanic-Rak-Razam/productreviews/1583948007/ref=cm\\_cr\\_ar\\_p\\_d\\_viewpnt\\_rgt?ie=UTF8&reviewerType=all\\_reviews&filterByStar=critical&pageNumber=1](https://www.amazon.com/Aya-Awakenings-Shamanic-Rak-Razam/productreviews/1583948007/ref=cm_cr_ar_p_d_viewpnt_rgt?ie=UTF8&reviewerType=all_reviews&filterByStar=critical&pageNumber=1)

The fourth interesting point is that O Sol appears to have knowledge about the ayahuasca culture since s/he criticizes the lack of sonic depth by perceiving the word ayahuasca mispronounced by Razam, which s/he claims shows a lack of awareness of the use of indigenous language as well as using the title chopped. (Aya instead of Ayahuasca). And the final interesting point by O Sol is that s/he believes that if one wants to truly understand ayahuasca and its spiritual realms, one is better off finding a true shaman to trust, leaving behind sensational Western motifs.

With respect to the triangle of communication, here, the filmmakers have succeeded in awakening strong feelings in the viewers, resulting in a very long statement. The difference is that there is no sense of identification, rather the opposite. Cognitively, it is a constructive response, important to listen to, particularly because it can help future Ayahuasca filmmakers to consider these issues in order to avoid falling into cultural appropriation accusations because even if that is not directly stated by O Sol, it is what s/he articulates when s/he, in the last part of the statement, addresses other potential viewers/spectators with the words: ‘Find yourself a true shaman and leave behind western motifs’.

The overall statement might be interpreted as having a sense of irritation at the fact that a Westerner is blowing the ayahuasca culture up for his own commercial interests, either to sell the film, book, or as in the comment by JL where she states that the book lacks soul and is also an apparent way to promote Razam’s own Ayahuasca tours in Peru. Finally, the last, less-constructive comment by Ephraim S Casper states that the book is unimpressive and Razam fails at being a good ‘gonzo journalist’ (without explaining further how unimpressive the film is).

Gonzo journalism is a form of journalism without any claims of objectivity, where the journalist is part of the story in a first-person narrative. This was initially adopted by American journalist, Hunter S. Thompson.<sup>42</sup>

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Two of the above three top critical comments on Amazon do, however, have the most votes for being helpful to other readers/viewers compared to the more positive ones which either have no or a maximum of three votes, with the exception of one comment that obtained five votes. Furthermore, in the United States, the book received 11 positive comments and four critical ones, while receiving five positive and one critical comment internationally. The film had no comments by an international audience, but it received nine positive comments and eight critical ones in the U.S.

The five-star comment that received most number of votes for being helpful states the following:



Drew Gould

*5.0 out of 5 stars* It's an amazing journey

Reviewed in the United States on February 3, 2014

Rak Razam makes me want to take the ayahuasca journey. I have heard about it from freinds in Australia but it has so much more relevance when reading about his journey into the inner mind launching him on his psychonaut visions. The cleansing aspect of ayahuasca really appeals to me. I have even emailed the Guillermo ayahuasca retreat in Iquitos in Peru to find out about the cost of travelling there. He describes things so well that are by his own admission beyond words. He also says things how they are and doesn't make all the practitioners to be all love and light but exposes those who are in it for the money or too boost their ego. Well written. Rarely is it that I read a book that calls to me and says you need to do this.

5 people found this helpful

The above most-voted positive review might tell something in particular about the aim and function of the medium itself. That which, according to the present example, awakens the curiosity of a Westerner who has not had the ayahuasca experience but urges to try it; as the commentator

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<sup>42</sup> Encyclopaedia Britannica, latest update; July 14, 2020 by Managing Editor, Augustyn, Adam, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Hunter-S-Thompson#ref837474> extracted 20/08/2020

above demonstrates, he *feels* compelled to do it. In that respect, the triangle of communication has successfully accomplished its goal through cognitivism where the mental representation of the film incites a capacity to think, feel, communicate, and act. Drew Gould's comment demonstrates, on a micro level, the potential and functionality an ayahuasca documentary might create. The goal of the filmmakers is to awaken the audience's knowledge and arouse interest in ancient sacred wisdom from the Amazon. If one recalls the introduction: '*For all those seeds the vine has touched and for those yet to awaken...*'. Here, it suggests that the mediation of realities within the documentary practice and the ability to transmit the ayahuasca experience to the viewer through the film character and its character engagement has enormously succeeded for that particular Western viewer and the other five viewers who voted his comment as helpful. It provides a micro-lens into what can lead to further study of spectator's responses in macro levels and possible consequences thereby. Macro levels, here, merely suggests more extensive studies.

In an article published in *The Guardian*, Francisco Montes Shuna, a curandero managing the Sachamama Botanical Garden, says most retreat centres are owned by non-Peruvians and therefore should be closed. "It is our culture; the Amazon's culture," declares Shuna, whose parents were native Capanahuas. "Foreigners are coming here and stealing our knowledge," he affirms.<sup>43</sup>

Returning to O Sol's comment for a closer review of his/her words, we see that s/he provides a sense of overprotection towards the Ayahuasca culture, conveying a judgemental attitude towards Razam who happens to mispronounce the name of a medicinal plant. However, an even closer view might explain, to an extent, why those feelings are that strong. If one considers the history of colonialism inflicted by European descendants, depending on which perspective one looks at, a suspicion towards the offspring of former colonizers could explain a sense of fear: A fear

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<sup>43</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/travel/2016/jun/07/peru-ayahuasca-drink-boom-amazon-spirituality-healing>

of appropriation by Westerners or fear that the ancient medicine, preserved by the native Amazonian people for centuries, would be extinguished, and history might repeat itself.

The intentional sensationalism is indeed palpable throughout the film. However, regarding Razam's emotional cognitive compass, it seems that it was an honest portrayal of how he felt when he landed in the Amazon to experience Ayahuasca for the first time. Thus, his emotional compass with this points towards the cognitive side of the filmmaker himself, his thoughts, feelings, and actions. The reflection of his excited, emotional compass is notable throughout the film with a shift in the last chapter, 'Awakenings,' where the narrative tone of Razam begins to change to a more quiet and reflective mode. He proceeds to demonstrate that reflection using Kevin Furnas' recorded audio and still pictures of him.

**Voiceover by Furnas:** As human beings, this is the first time we are on a planetary level. In the past, we all killed each other, tribes, nations, empires. This is the first time we are on a world scale. It's not just about individual evolution, it's about planetary evolution. When we work together, cooperative modes, we can change the dream of this planet.

The commentary by Furnas is correct to a certain level that humans are correlatively working on a planetary level, for example with the United Nations (U.N.) and other global organisations such as World Health Organisation (WHO) and Doctors without borders to name a few. The collective consciousness is gradually growing. However, one would strongly disagree that we all killed each other in the past. As if it is not happening any longer. Surely, killings have diminished, but humans are still killing each other often because of territorial insecurities, religious or political disbeliefs/disagreements, economic interests, or racial/ethnic conflicts, and all this is led by fear in different shapes.

The invitation to awaken, as it is the first quote in *Aya-Awakenings*, literally means for the viewer to realise what story s/he has been born to and what her/his matrix is. Story, here, refers to what culture s/he has been brought up with, worldviews, beliefs, and disbeliefs. Razam provides his own realisations, and even though his so-called sensationalism is palpable at first, one can also *see* his genuine intentions towards the end of the film. His personal journey has been both as film character/journalist and filmmaker/producer, and, as the pace of the documentary becomes calmer and the sound of his voice changes to a more soothing tone, the documentary becomes less hectic towards the end, and it indeed provides a sense of awakening into self-realisation in harmony. This is what Razam explains further in the interview:

**Interview by Rak Razam:** What I discovered with Aya-awakenings. I went to the jungle as a journalist, but what was really happening is that I was being initiated to my spiritual path. For me, combining the sharing of my spiritual experience and media work in different ways, it is all about the spiritual experience. The world is bigger than I was able to believe, that is what I could see in 2006. An ecology that exists in those other realms. There is more, the scientific paradigm and the spiritual paradigm, 500 years or so the two got separated. I believe this paradigm is coming back to the world to make us be in relation with the planet and with ourselves, that is what Aya-awakenings did for me.

Razam's words have evolved into a different tone, which is less sensational compared to the beginning of *Aya-Awakenings*. It is, after all, 14 years after he first had the ayahuasca experience. The history of Ayahuasca documentary film and Ayahuasca itself is still being written. Thus, it remains to be seen whether Razam's intentions are genuine or not; however, that is most certainly also valid for any Westerner or native using Ayahuasca in one way or another. If they are gaining commercial interests, it all comes down to their real intention. Ultimately, *AyaAwakenings* contributes to the Ayahuasca documentary subgenre by introducing Ayahuasca (the plant teacher) to Western viewers and by calling attention to the commercialisation and globalisation of Ayahuasca ceremonies in the Amazon. Razam here introduces the term, Ayahuasca Tourism, something Richard Meech does not reflect upon in *Ayahuasca Vine of the Soul*, produced three years before *Aya-Awakenings*. That could be the result of the plant teacher's growing industry. Moreover, *Aya-*

*Awakenings* is unique in its aesthetic style with a narrative in the first person by Razam himself which is inspired by gonzo journalism storytelling.

*Aya-Awakenings* meets many of the general traits observed in other ayahuasca documentaries that help define the Ayahuasca subgenre. Following are some of the more implicit traits: The film is made in English by two male makers. The plot is about a Westerner travelling to the Amazon to try the Ayahuasca experience. Ayahuasca (the plant teacher) is one of the main protagonists. Subsequently, it raises criticism towards Western ways of life on the earth, among other traits. For example, it invites the viewer to learn more about the planet by disclosing knowledge about the Q'eros who are a group of people known as the Inca descendants and are the keepers of the 'sacred knowledge'.

Towards the end of the film, when Razam shares his sensitivity by stating how he has opened up to sense the energies of the mountains (when meeting up with Kevin Furnas in the Sacred Valley Ollantaytambo), Furnas explains that Ayahuasca is a tool that peels off the filters of the chakras. He discloses that the Q'eros do not need Ayahuasca to see energy, as they have other systems in the Andeans. He would be referring to historical stories about the mysticism, telling that the Incas have gone hiding towards the forest. The Q'eros live between the skirts of the highlands and the Amazon.

In this way, the documentary mixes a poetic, participatory, and performative documentary-style after Bill Nichols' modes with a fast-pulse editing and sensational voice-over throughout the beginning of the film. This balances itself out towards the end where the impact of the Ayahuasca experience, as Razam has perceived, grounds him, as a deeper meaning is revealed to him as a storyteller.

Based on the online audience interaction made on this documentary, it seems directed to any Westerner curious for an experience. The first impression is that it presents itself as sensational, and one can argue that the Amazonian traditions are far from that. However, on the other hand, this sensationalism can be read as being indicative of the storyteller's initial impression about which, as Razam mentions, he and Parish wanted to create an experiential documentary, which they have fulfilled.

Both films *Ayahuasca Vine of the Soul* and *Aya-Awakenings* express a desire to illuminate the Western audience about this part of the world, these societies, and their ancient ways of communicating and living in symbiosis with nature. The main contrast between these two films is that of the film language employed—*Ayahuasca Vine of the Soul* shares Bill Nichols' participatory and expository modes. Meech participates through a voice-over style, using the framework of the film as an essay. In contrast, while *Aya-Awakenings* too is participatory, it also has a poetic and performative mode. Besides, the film experiments with kaleidoscopic visuals as a complement to the music and voice-over by Razam when he is not on camera. However, Razam is fully performative, both in voice-over and physically. Perhaps the most impactful is the chapter called 'The Experiment at the Rosarita,' where Razam in collaboration with a neuroscientist and a Western shaman experiment with pure DMT in the middle of the jungle and encounters God or, as he calls it, *It*. The film also uses footage that is borrowed, in fact, from Richard Meech himself from *Ayahuasca Vine of the Soul* and sound recording from Guillermo Arevalo, the shaman with his shamanic songs also known as *Icaros*.

*Aya-Awakenings* is a collaborative production nonetheless by friends who donated film footage of the jungle or ambience images. Razam had an extensive collaboration with the Icaro foundation as well as with those who were interested in Ayahuasca. Indeed, a grassroots network. Although Razam mentions ayahuasca tourism in the documentary, something Meech does not at all,

he does not analyse it but only describes it, which implicitly indicates how the consciousness was at the time of production. Razam might not have thought of the effects such tourism might have or what his sensational story for a Western audience might result in within the local communities in the

Amazon. Seven years later, the conversation regarding natives and scientists concerning the globalisation of Ayahuasca has become more critical than in the past few years. As previously mentioned by a local healer in *The Guardian's* article, most of the Ayahuasca retreat centres are foreign-owned. This unquestionably indicates that most of the wealth earned by expensive Ayahuasca ceremonies go to the owners and a fraction to the native shamans and helpers.

In this way, the foreigners/Westerners might yet again be taking advantage in a neo-colonialist society. If that is true, and if those intentions by Westerners are solely to steal and capitalise the ancient knowledge of the Amazonian communities using documentaries as propaganda for Westerners, then it needs our attention. However, suppose the intention is indeed to help heal people and the planet. In that case, it does not matter who owns these retreat centres as long as the native communities are treated respectfully and receive a portion of these incomes. After all, if it was not for the medicine men, and their protection and conservation of the medicinal plant knowledge for centuries, the West would have never found out about it. Thus, there would not be seeds in the West for the vine to touch and perhaps no one would awaken.

## 5 MOST RELEVANT FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

In continuation, the present study suggests the five most relevant findings of the sub-genre Ayahuasca documentary film, including *Ayahuasca Vine of the soul* and *Aya-Awakenings*. Each key finding is followed by a discussion.

### Key Findings of Ayahuasca Documentary Film

- 1. The Internet and the digital world have expanded the Ayahuasca culture for the past two decades, especially since the introduction of YouTube in 2005. A cooperative relation that functions as a tool, offering free accessibility of the documentary format for users around the world, thus, creating a space for knowledge between Western and Amazonian history.**

As evident in my analyses of both case studies, the subgenre Ayahuasca documentary film and its market are growing because of the Internet and the contemporary digitalisation era. The evidence points to thousands of personal testimonies and stories of the Ayahuasca experience, either by video images or in written media on diverse online platforms, especially YouTube, confirming a growing interest for the sacred shamanic medicine in popular culture, which I have illustrated. The findings will help us gain and share knowledge about Ayahuasca through moving and written media, both being equally influential. An unexpected finding I have discovered is that one can also find music and podcasts in audio platforms such as Spotify in homage to plant medicine and the Ayahuasca culture. I found that people have the urge to tell about their experiences, as there are more people eager to hear about these experiences and to learn more about the subject. Due to the Internet, human communication across the globe is instant, and such development would not have been possible three decades ago. Anyone can essentially become a maker, as I also discovered a number of amateur ayahuasca documentaries by young people sharing their stories on YouTube.

However, it is essential to acknowledge that technology cannot carry on thriving for humanity, without further expansion of consciousness for the planet and our fellow human beings and animals.

While one is plundering minerals, overexploiting animals and oceans, enslaving individuals to a lifetime of minimum wages, as many global corporations do, we are reminded of the destructive colonial ideologies and savagery under the surface. Reflecting on the planet as a living organism, as James Lovelock would say, an ideology to my surprise shared by the Amazonian people, calls for

attention to think that, for example, in Western culture, it might be prestigious and even honourable to buy expensive brands and gems. It usually is a sign of success. Most of us while enjoying these are oblivious to the fact that the product might literally contain the blood and sweat of very low-paid human workers living outside the Western world.

As previously illustrated in this study, the ayahuasca documentary provides evidence on issues of materialism and apparent disconnection to the planet, it reminds the Western audience of past and subtle indoctrination inherited from previous generations of colonisers and slaveowners. It is not easy to know what else technology might bring this century. However, one thing is for sure: for technology to be beneficial to humankind, it is important that those in charge of these technologies apply everyone's best. By that, the least would be not to cause any harm to living beings.

The *secret* knowledge of the Amazon is no longer a secret, as information about Ayahuasca is found on the Internet on various digital platforms, thus, it is available to anyone who wants to learn more about it. Ayahuasca documentaries might have significantly contributed to expanding that knowledge from science to popular culture, thus evoking new thoughts about other realities, other dimensions, for social change, and the unknown to come.

## **2. An urge to emotional healing and self-development by Western society in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century through the Ayahuasca documentary film.**

I have provided historical evidence of emotions and how emotions have been considered in Western society up to present time. The study provides a hypothesis that since emotions have been so neglected and repressed in Western society, it might have left scars in many of us which, in

today's societies, may result in mass depression among and cause huge groups of people to lack love or feel disconnection with themselves and the planet, everything that brings us to emotional healing. Emotional healing is a term often used in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and in the Ayahuasca documentaries. I have found that emotional healing is one of the most prominent reasons considered for the Ayahuasca experience by the Western population. This study has, for instance, experienced this through the strong emotional scene of Kirstie in *Ayahuasca Vine of the Soul* where she ends up realising that she had so many difficulties in the last ceremony because she was putting up a barrier and was afraid of showing vulnerability. This is an implicit reference to the notion of the previously-mentioned indoctrination in Western beliefs.

Based on my observations of the interviews with shamans and Western scholars, through the two previous case studies, the Ayahuasca documentary considers these beliefs to be caused by a disconnection in spirituality and lack of honour for the earth in Western societies. Here is an argument, based on a critic of Western history, found in the literature referred by neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, which considers emotions to be animalistic in a way and separate from the rational. Therefore, I strongly suggest that Western society has learnt to think and act in specific ways that does not involve emotions, at least on the surface. It reflects a society which in contemporary times is in acute need to heal mental health problems, possibly because of all that bottled up emotions and its consequences. It is to argue that this issue is concerned particularly with the male population, given that men have had a specific image to preserve.

In Western society, men have learnt to keep their emotions locked inside for centuries in order to be considered as real men, particularly if their emotions are of a vulnerable kind. Therefore, one suggests that it might be an essential finding, where the Ayahuasca documentary serves as a distinguished function to see the number of people, not only among the male population, that are looking to heal themselves outside traditional Western medicinal practices, prompting a necessity to

connect to their roots, which is the planet itself. However, another astonishing finding concerning emotional healing is that it is mostly male filmmakers who make the majority of Ayahuasca documentaries. Another significant observation is that most scholars who advocate the Ayahuasca experience are men. Not that one will make it a gender issue, but it is unmistakable evidence suggesting that it is becoming more acceptable for men to seek and evolve their emotional side in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Thus, self-development becomes a natural step from the mentioned emotional healing in the ayahuasca documentary. This has been stated previously in both the case studies: First, by Rob in *Ayahuasca Vine of the Soul* and his testimonial towards the end of the documentary about Kirstie and himself in relation to his brother and, second, in *Aya Awakenings* wherein Rak shares his insights about the world, stating that we are all part of the universal awakening towards the end of the film. This is reconfirmed in our interview when he shares that it all was part of his spiritual awakening; it was about that more than actually going to the Amazon to write an article. Finally, Kirstie, towards the end of the film, also shares with us the kind of love she felt in her last Ayahuasca ceremony, a type of love that is not from here. It suggests that the feelings she experienced opened up a new circuit in her mind, making her experience abundant love like never felt before, which is heavenly in away.

### **3. The subgenre Ayahuasca documentary works as a catalyst for the Amazonian ancestral knowledge.**

Through the netnography study, I have found that in every Ayahuasca documentary, the filmmaker recognises the ancestral Amazonian philosophy and ways of living through the documentary format. This recognition is observed through the collaboration between artists,

scientists, and academics and is reflected in these films and in various media channels. As one has identified, the first scientific recognition since Richard Evans Schultes has increased the academic interest in Ayahuasca further into the 1990s, which towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century gave birth to a new emerging type of documentary that I have presented with *Shamans of the Amazon* by Dean Jefferys, namely, the subgenre called Ayahuasca documentary. Thus, it is evident that the subgenre of Ayahuasca documentary works as a catalyst for the Amazonian ancestral knowledge to the Western world. Razam's story in *Aya-Awakenings* constitutes realising that his journey to the Amazon had not been merely to write an article, as discovered through the interview, but it was part of his spiritual initiation.

This is a vivid example that Razam's consciousness shifts after the Ayahuasca experience. He realised the world is more significant than he had believed before the Ayahuasca experience, he told me. He also mentions that the scientific and spiritual paradigm, which were separated about 500 years ago, are approaching each other again, connecting us to the planet and ourselves. Razam's statement, along with that of many other advocates of the Ayahuasca culture, invites us to reflect upon the purpose behind the exploration and spread of the Ayahuasca knowledge in Western societies. As demonstrated in the analysis of *Aya-awakenings*, Razam had not reflected about any possible negative consequences when exposing the ancestral knowledge of the Amazon cultures in reference to ayahuasca tourism. Meech did not even think about bringing the term up, because that consciousness was not there at the time of the film production, at least not in the same magnitude as it is today, which is enough to be considered for examination. With that, I think it is important to realise that knowledge is fluid and *having an experience* evolves, indeed, through time and space for generations.

It is, thus, essential to examine these documentaries to investigate the filmmakers' and their films' purpose. Here, it is evident that the films are not merely to educate but also to raise

consciousness of all who come in contact with this knowledge. To raise consciousness is to involve in a more in-depth manner intending to bring about social change. Hereby, as previously seen by the shared experiences and conversation between spectators Allen Lichner, 1LaOriental, LS, and Awakken470, their experiences and the point of their conversation is to claim a social change that would imply changing the hierarchical structure of pharmaceuticals and the political ideologies of some politicians. A claim that humans do not need wars but do need Ayahuasca. What does it say about our contemporary time and history? Where is humanity going? Perhaps the belief in the scientific and spiritual paradigm that Razam was stating previously is indeed evoking to approach each other through ways such as with the ayahuasca documentary, which attempts to connect us to the planet and ourselves by cognitively igniting new beliefs, as it seems that humans incline on remembering ancient ways of living, when the connection to nature was essential. Something that we humans have forgotten in our modern world. In this way Ayahuasca documentary transcends to be a catalyst for the Amazonian ancient knowledge.

#### **4. Cognitive film theory supports the study of Ayahuasca documentary film, providing evidence of social impact in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century Western society**

Hereby, cognitive film theory is found to support the study of Ayahuasca documentary film, providing evidence of social impact according to the triangle of communication and the nethnography applied in the analyses. The study follows the encounters that Ayahuasca has had

with humans, native to the Amazon, but mostly from the Western hemisphere. The study also traces a historicity to the emotional connection and how emotion has been viewed in Western societies, finding that there is a lack of connection between the earth and modern humans and lack of love for themselves. As previously discussed, the presentation of the historical role and Western interest in Ayahuasca further develops science and has become a multidisciplinary quest, giving birth to the subgenre of Ayahuasca documentary film, which has offered a reflection of modern 21<sup>st</sup>-century Western society.

The reflection is the urge to reconnect to the forgotten spiritual habits of ritual, ceremony, and worship of the earth. If beauty holds in the eye of the beholder, spirituality holds in the brain of the heart, now that neuroscience has discovered that emotions and rational thinking are not separate, unless there is unconsciousness. The present study defines consciousness as *having an experience*, it means that one can learn from these documentaries. On a micro-level, there has been evidence of different responses from some viewers who have shared their thoughts and ideas. The particular conversation of Allen Lichner<sup>2</sup>, 1LaOriental, LS, and Awakken<sup>470</sup> comes to mind when discussing *Ayahuasca Vine of the Soul*. They were not talking about the film itself, but specifically about some content that the film produced in them. Allen Lichner<sup>2</sup> begins by criticising the pharma industry, stating that Ayahuasca is illegal (in Western societies) due to the impact it could have on the pharmaceutical industry. It would not be economically profitable if humans or patients with mental health issues use Ayahuasca once or twice instead of a lifetime of antidepressants. 1LaOriental responds that it is more than the pharmaceutical industry being threatened: it is the whole system, she states. She refers to the Western system and mentions consumerism, Wall Street, war, poverty, surveillance systems, the police state, and she asks what will happen? Not knowing the answer herself, she states that Ayahuasca is trying to tell something and we should listen. Now, concerning this study, it is possible to answer 1LaOriental's question based on this study's evidence in the observed transformation that the rituals of Ayahuasca seem to offer those that participate in

them. Thus, it is difficult to answer what will happen to the whole system at this stage. However, one could begin to think that it would provoke a sense of transformation, meaning that it would literally expand their consciousness. In the observations obtained through Ayahuasca documentary film and the testimonies, thereby, an emotional transformation happens in the individual, which would inevitably lead to a transformation of their physical actions.

I have found that the film characters studied acknowledge that there is a significant force within all after their Ayahuasca experience. In short, the results perceived are that if one learns to love and respect oneself and another human or living being, one will not take from nature without a conscious choice. Thereby, one would not exploit less knowledgeable people in developing countries in the name of a god or science or a dictator as is still the case in contemporary times. Therefore, there would not be a constant greediness and desire for power at all cost if one knew that resources will always be there because we treat them with respect. One could claim that it is a reasonable logic, and most people should know that. However, most people in charge of commerce, banks, and states do not always follow what is right for humanity and the planet but what is 'reasonable' to their economies and people. The conversation continues with Allen Lichner<sup>2</sup> suggesting all politicians to try Ayahuasca before making laws. LS responds by stating that is something s/he has thought of and refers to the 'Donald Trumps of the world', stating further that one does not need wars but that 'we', the world, needs Ayahuasca. Awakken<sup>470</sup> responds, 'holy shit can you imagine.' The final part of the conversation implies that people want a change in their societies.

It also suggests that people are tired of contemporary governments by referring to the 'Donald Trumps of the world'. It might suggest that instead of electing egocentric, sexist, and shallow candidates to rule their countries where their land of reference comes first, as in 'America first', one should instead be looking at candidates that genuinely care for the well-being of humankind, the whole planet, all nations included. Furthermore, when LS states that 'we' do not

need wars but what the world needs is Ayahuasca, it is an imploration to heal. Humanity needs to heal itself from all the ongoing pain and self-caused destruction of centuries. Perhaps, Razam is right in believing in the scientific and spiritual paradigms which were separated approximately 500 years ago. Thus, we are coming back together as one paradigm—making us humans to connect with ourselves and the planet.

The world needing Ayahuasca stated by LS might not necessarily mean that everyone should try the Ayahuasca experience. However, it makes one think of the possible impact Ayahuasca might have as a therapeutic tool to help transform that idea. Recalling Damasio's statement that consciousness is about enhancing the art of living, the Ayahuasca documentary format shows ways of human transformation on the psychological, spiritual, and emotional level. However, the transformation also becomes physical, as in the change of actions. Bob, the accountant in *Ayahuasca Vine of the Soul*, after his ayahuasca experience, became more conscious about his relationship with his brother, choosing to spend more time with him towards the end of the film. Kirstie's realisation towards the end of the film was about the relationship towards herself. Also, possibly ending in a physical change as she had depended on what others might think of her, thus, becoming more loving and accepting of herself. Razam's transformation after his ayahuasca experience ended in expanded consciousness in a physical form. It resulted in the book he wrote and, later, the film he co-created with Timothy Parish. Further, physical actions after his ayahuasca experience would be the Ayahuasca tours he seems to facilitate in Peru and other documentaries on the subject of spirituality.

**5. The Ayahuasca documentary film subgenre incites its audience to consider other realms of reality. Thereby, the purpose is to educate and inspire, thus, expand their audiences' consciousness**

Through this study, following Ayahuasca (the plant teacher) and Ayahuasca the brew as well as Ayahuasca the documentary film, I have discovered a new gate of light which communicates that

there are other realms of reality, other realms to perceive reality as it is to experience spirituality. By that, it confirms that the primary purpose of the Ayahuasca documentary film is not to entertain but to educate and inspire its audience. Thus, to expand human consciousness. Thus, in *Ayahuasca Vine Of the Soul*, when telling about his experience with Ayahuasca, Mckenna states that he felt it communicated with him, and he believes that the way the plant communicates could be a last imploration from the planet, as the decadent Western ways of treating the planet must stop. That gate of light echoes in every ayahuasca documentary. These films show their audience to look at the way these Amazonian communities have managed to live in harmony with nature for thousands of years. These communities show that it is possible to live in symbiosis with nature, despite all the damages that have been caused to them by the same Western invaders. The symbiosis has been possible by means of entering other states of consciousness as, for example, communicating with the plants and energies even if it sounds strange to most Western beliefs. Now, one must provide clinical evidence for a Western mind to accept any slight possibility, which is why they are currently conducting research in diverse disciplines. It must be noted that in stating that Ayahuasca communicates with humans, it is based on how humans describe the experience as it has been presented with Kirstie when she describes in *Ayahuasca Vine of the Soul* that the love she had experienced was not from here. It suggests that, in human language, that is how it can be explained.

In scientific language, it can mean that neurons are communicating with each other, as studies mentioned earlier in this research have demonstrated that the creative function in the brain gets activated on ingesting Ayahuasca, which produces insightful thoughts in the individual. Diverse studies of Ayahuasca are still in its initial stage. As those studies advance, it will be possible to follow its historicity and development through the realm of film and media studies as well, as the number of Ayahuasca documentaries continue in production and since Ayahuasca is becoming more prominent in popular culture. There is a necessity to continue examining these results to see what

other impacts might continue to develop on Western communities and beyond economically, politically, culturally, psychologically, and spiritually.

## 6 CONCLUSION

This Master's thesis has provided evidence in the form of historical references about the rise of a new type of documentary film which focuses on the effects of an Amazonian plant known as Ayahuasca. The research has examined what Ayahuasca is, its use and how its ancient cultural rites have been transforming into new cultural practices for the western population in the 21st century. It has as well looked at the meaning of the documentary film. Through the establishment of that cultural transformation, the research discovered the first Ayahuasca documentary film *Shamans of the Amazon* (2001), which is directed specifically at a Western audience.

Through a vast number of articles and creative expressions in different types of media, this investigation has resulted in empirical findings of fifty documentaries traced online. Two of these have resulted in case studies. A general overview of the traced Ayahuasca documentaries has given birth to useful recurrent general traits which the study has found fruitful, as it has provided a better understanding of these films, which has helped to define the subgenre of Ayahuasca documentary film. Thus, the Internet and digital platforms have proven essential in the dissemination of the Amazonian wisdom discovered through these films.

The Ayahuasca documentary films and the reviewed academic research have illustrated that a growing interest of Western citizens are showing in this cultural phenomenon attempting for a better Self and a better world, which has as well shown in the case studies. In that way, the Ayahuasca documentary has assisted as a synergist for the collective human consciousness, transferring ancient values of ecology and kinship. It has invited us to inspire towards the creation

of justice and peacemaking in contemporary times. *Ayahuasca Vine of the Soul* has taught us the consequence of vulnerability before connecting to oneself or anyone else and thereby serving others. *AyaAwakenings* has illuminated the historical encounter between Ancient spiritual wisdom and modern capitalist curiosity, both films essentially uncovering human transformation and human interaction as has been demonstrated through the Netnography of the research by the reviewers and commentators. Both films have led us to reflect on our existence and the existence of other realms, such as consciousness.

In gaining consciousness, the Ayahuasca documentary film invites the spectator to reflect and learn about other realities and ancient cultural practices in a modern language. The research has manifested the growing interest science has been placing in Ayahuasca since the 1950s. Even if the process was slow, it has gradually changed because of scholars and open-minded advocates and experimenters. The documentaries ask to see people who believe that this ancient knowledge would give us a better world and, for that reason, have gathered together to work with themselves, interdisciplinary and transnationally, which is indeed important because it promotes peace and raises consciousness about our ecology.

The Ayahuasca documentary film can shed light on current historical research of Ayahuasca, as well as reveal socio-anthropological knowledge. It challenges the status quo because it appears provocative but let us find out more. Let us initiate a conversation in the film and media studies and follow the development of Ayahuasca from a visual cultural perspective. I suggest that it is necessary to examine any future social results and impacts the medium of Ayahuasca documentary might have on Western communities, and vice-versa, as I think it might reflect the development of the Ayahuasca documentary filmmaking.

Further suggested research would be in the globalisation of Ayahuasca from a film and media perspective, and how Western consumerism is impacting the Amazonian communities. And if any socio-anthropological study has researched this how would it be reflected in more contemporary Ayahuasca documentaries? If Dennis McKenna's statement, that our planet's intelligence is attempting to communicate to humans through the Ayahuasca brew, has even the slightest bit of truth in it, it shall be exciting to see what else the Earth has to say through the humans portrayed in these documentaries.

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## FILMOGRAPHY

### Title

*Ayahuasca Vine of the Soul*

**Country** Canada

**Production Year** 2010

**Written, Produced and Directed by** Richard Meech

### Director of Photography

Derek Rogers csc

### Editor

Chris Cassino

### Music by

Eric Cadesky and Nick Dyer

**Production Manager** Deborah MacDonald

### Executive Producers

Richard Meech and Jerry McIntosh

**Executive Producer, VisionTV** Joan  
Jenkinson

**Story Consultant** Allen  
Booth

**Video Post-Production**  
Imarion

**Online Editor** Dan  
Johnston

**Assistant Editor**  
Yuval Sagiv

**Sound Mixer**  
Richard Spence-Thomas

**Sound Recordists**  
Mario Rivas  
Ian Challis  
Patrick Brereton

**Production Accountant** Robin  
Mader

**Business Affairs** Del  
Mehes

**Visual Research**  
Elizabeth Klinck

**Head of Contracts, Rights & Distribution, VisionTV**  
Colette Johnson-Vosberg

**Title Graphics** Alex  
Bulzan  
Ervan Cunanan

**Runtime**

52min

**Cast**

**Curanderos:** Dave, Francois, Guillermo

**Participants:** Kirsten Smith ND, Rob Mader, Colin Miller, Nina Fields

**Experts:** Gabor Maté M.D., Dennis McKenna PhD, Kenneth Tupper

**Home Page** <https://vineofthesoul.com/the-film/>

**Title**

*Aya-Awakenings*

**Directed by**

Rak Razam & Timothy Parish

**Written by**

Rak Razam

**Produced by**

Jonathan Davis

Timothy Parish

Rak Razam

Mitch Schultz

**Country**

Australia, Peru

**Production Year**

2013

**Music by**

Dave Tipper

**Cinematography & Editing**

Timothy Parish

**Art Department**

Pablo Amaringo

Sham Carroll

Anderson Debernardi

Timothy Parish

**Sound Department**

John Bowman

Lulu Madill

Rak Razam

**Visual Effects by**

Beau Deeley Scott  
Draves  
Timothy Parish  
Pete Walker

**Camera and Electrical Department**

Tom Askew  
John Bowman  
Martin Chambi  
Howard G Charing  
Jeffrey A. Cox  
Cosmic Dave  
Oli Dunlop  
Jialiang Gao  
Vance Gellert  
Dean Jeffreys  
Dr. Juan  
Tom McKinnon  
Jim Newberry  
Rumi Orion  
Timothy Parish  
Leonide Principe  
Afra Razam  
Rak Razam  
Foxy Afra Tarzana Shazam  
Dan Somanoma

**Animation Department**

Bernd Brummbär  
Beau Deeley Scott  
Draves  
Timothy Parish  
Pete Walker

**Editorial Department**

Jonathan Davis

**Music Department**

Guillermo Arevalo  
Darpan  
The Estrella Centre Singers  
Kevin Furnas  
Rob Hoad  
Lulu Madill  
Paula Harbrink Numan

Don Juan Tangoa Paima  
Doña Norma Panduro

**Additional Crew**

Patricia Bigotes  
Federico Rama Le Clerc  
Sarah Lopes  
Maria Goretti Bello Serans

**Runtime** 101min

**Home page** <http://www.aya-awakenings.com/watch/>

**Title**

*Shamans of the Amazon*

**Directing & Writing by**

Jeffreys, Dean

**Production Companies**

Dean Jeffreys Films  
SBS Independent

**Production Year**

2001

**Country**

Australia

**Runtime**

52 min

**Box Office Budget**

AUD 9400 (estimated)

**Title**

*Other Worlds*

**Directing by**

Jan Kounen

**Writers**

Dominique Fausset,  
Manna Mégard

**Produced by**

Hugues Darmois  
Jan Kounen  
Dileep Singh Rathore  
Ariel Zeitoun

**Country**

France

**Production Year**

2004

**Runtime** 90min

**Title**

*Nanook of the North* **Director**

Roberth J Flaherty

**Production Year**

1922

**Country**

Usa, France

**Box Office Budget**

USD 53000 (estimated)

**Runtime**

74min (1922)

**DIGITAL RESOURCES**

[https://www.amazon.com/Aya-Awakenings-Shamanic-Rak-Razam-ebook/dp/B00DK71E82/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?dchild=1&keywords=Aya+awakenings+a+shamanic+odyssey&qid=1605714973&sr=8-1](https://www.amazon.com/Aya-Awakenings-Shamanic-Rak-Razam-ebook/dp/B00DK71E82/ref=sr_1_1?dchild=1&keywords=Aya+awakenings+a+shamanic+odyssey&qid=1605714973&sr=8-1)

<http://botanicaldimensions.org/what-is-ethnobotany/>

<https://www.britishpathe.com/video/tropic-matters/query/amazon>

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-49918451>

The Academy of Achievement; Interview with Richard Evans Schultes, 1990

<https://achievement.org/achiever/richard-evans-schultes-ph-d/#interview>

<https://www.theguardian.com/travel/2016/jun/07/peru-ayahuasca-drink-boom-amazonspirituality-healing>

#### **UNPUBLISHED AUDIO**

Transcript from audio-recorded interview with Rak Razam on 2020/04/02, available by request.