

Nick Davis
Film Discussion Group
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The Lost City of Z (dir. James Gray, 2016)

On Camera

- Percy Fawcett: Charlie Hunnam: early: *Nicholas Nickleby* (02); UK *Queer as Folk* (99-00); recently: *Sons of Anarchy* (08-14); the current *King Arthur* (17); cast in the lead of *Fifty Shades of Grey* but pulled out over interpretive differences
- Nina, his wife: Sienna Miller: Edie Sedgwick in *Factory Girl* (06); *Mississippi Grind* (15); quiet, thankless “wife” roles in *Foxcatcher* (14), *American Sniper* (14)
- Jack, his son: Tom Holland: *The Impossible* (12); starring in *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (17); *Lip Sync Battle* champ: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LqBiycUo_ew
- Henry Costin: Robert Pattinson: the *Twilight* saga (08-12); *Cosmopolis* (12)
- James Murray: Angus Macfadyen: *Braveheart* (95); *Cradle Will Rock* (99), as Orson Welles
- Sir George, RGS: Ian McDiarmid: the Emperor in the *Star Wars* films (83-05); Tony winner

Off Camera

- Writer/Director: James Gray: Queens-born filmmaker making his sixth feature film (see below)
- Cinematography: Darius Khondji: Tehran-born master cinematographer of movies, music videos; *Seven* (95); *Evita* (96); *Midnight in Paris* (11), among other Woody Allens
- Art Direction: Jean-Vincent Puzos: works in period and fantasy genres, plus realistic dramas
- Costume Design: Sonia Grande: lots of different work for Pedro Almodóvar and Woody Allen
- Film Editing: John Axelrad: Chicago-born editor; has worked with Gray four times in a row
Lee Haugen: recently moved up from assistant editor; *Dear White People* (15)
- Original Score: Christopher YOUNG: all of his credits are with Gray; in this film, his original music blends with Ravel, Mozart, Verdi, Bach, Stravinsky, and many others

Also written and directed by James Gray ...

Little Odessa (1994) – NYC-set crime drama with Tim Roth, Edward Furlong, Vanessa Redgrave

The Yards (2000) – 70s-inspired urban-corruption drama with Joaquin Phoenix, Mark Wahlberg, Charlize Theron, James Caan, Ellen Burstyn, and Faye Dunaway—yes, the cast is killer

We Own the Night (2007) – A great NYC-set crime/police thriller, reuniting Phoenix, Wahlberg

Two Lovers (2008) – Broody New York love drama about a Jewish man (Joaquin Phoenix, again) whose parents have fixed him up with a friend’s daughter but who pines for Gwyneth Paltrow

The Immigrant (2013) – Early 20th-century period drama about a Polish woman (an incredible Marion Cotillard) separated from her sickly sister at Ellis Island and saved from deportation by a vaudeville producer (Phoenix) who forces her into prostitution; also stars Jeremy Renner

If you liked *The Lost City of Z*, you might also enjoy...

Aguirre, the Wrath of God (1972) – Early, staggering Werner Herzog film in which German actors play 16th-century Spanish conquistadors crossing the Andes and searching for El Dorado

Fitzcarraldo (1982) – Another Herzog drama about an early 20th-century Irish rubber baron who builds an opera house in the middle of the Amazon and drags the building through the jungle

At Play in the Fields of the Lord (1991) – Epic drama from Peter Matthiessen’s novel about several characters, including a Native American and some white missionaries, having a disastrous encounter with an indigenous Amazon tribe; with Tom Berenger, John Lithgow, Kathy Bates

Deep Water (2006) – Sad but amazing documentary about Donald Crowhurst, a working-class Englishman who tries to bring glory to his family by completing a sailing trip around the globe

Embrace of the Serpent (2015) – An Oscar nominee for Best Foreign Language Film and a word-of-mouth hit, braiding two white men’s Colombian jungle adventures in 1900 and 1940

Silence (2016) – Came and went too quickly this Christmas; Martin Scorsese’s ambitious drama about two 17th-century Portuguese Jesuits among the persecuted Christians of early Japan

Facts about *The Lost City of Z* you may appreciate...

Began as a very long *New Yorker* article by David Grann, published in September 2005, adapted by Grann into a 2009 nonfiction bestseller. The book also profiles Grann’s own voyage into the Amazon, during which he uncovers previously-unknown details about Fawcett’s journey. The film condenses several details, including the eight separate trips Fawcett made to Brazil.

Gray also based some of his script on *Exploration Fawcett*, a set of diaries that Fawcett’s younger son Brian—put “in charge” of the household when he leaves—compiled in tribute to his father.

Brad Pitt’s production company Plan B sent James Gray the book after *Two Lovers* in 2008, hoping Gray would direct and Pitt would star. Financing and logistical problems delayed the movie until 2013, when it almost got off the ground with Benedict Cumberbatch, and Pitt as producer. When Cumberbatch pulled out, Pitt suggested Hunnam, whom Gray agreed to cast after meeting him and realizing the actor shared Fawcett’s feelings of being underestimated in his craft, plus Fawcett’s working-class origins. (Hunnam grew up in Newcastle, England.)

The Amazon sequences were shot over seven weeks in Colombia. Light often died around 3:30pm. Cast and crew lived in the jungle throughout the most intense, remote periods of filming.

Z was shot on 35mm celluloid rather than a digital camera, which is standard for today’s feature films—and would have been infinitely easier and more compact to carry around the Amazon. Gray felt that the colors and light could never be the same or as period-evocative on digital.

The Royal Geographical Society, which is not portrayed positively at every stage of the story, nonetheless cooperated enthusiastically with the filmmakers, welcoming Gray and Hunnam into their archives and showing them dispatches and photographs from Fawcett’s trips.

Broad conversation topics...

Culture and Perspective: Gray wanted to tell a story constructed around the perspective of a white Englishman making a series of obsessive journeys back to Brazil, but did not wish to reproduce the racism and exoticism of Percy's time period—even if this meant putting more politically enlightened speeches into the character's mouth than he likely would have spoken, or even felt. Filmmakers often struggle in stories like this to present “Other” places like the Amazon as enigmatic or unknowable to their protagonists without reducing the landscape or its indigenous inhabitants into blank slates or caricatures. Do you think *Z* avoided this trap?

Motivation: Did you understand Percy's three journeys to the Amazon as being motivated primarily by the same goals and pressures, or did the nature of his zeal seem to change each time? Is this a story of obsessive focus on *one* task, or of an obsession that keeps changing? By extension, do you agree with Costin when he warns Percy that even if he finds *Z* it cannot possibly gratify all of his investments in this pursuit? Or, despite what transpires in them, do you interpret the final scenes as suggesting that Percy finally achieved the grace he sought?

Gender: Gray has spoken in many interviews about *not* seeing Percy's story as a tragedy, because he died more or less as he wished after witnessing spectacles that few people outside the Amazon ever see. At the same time, Gray insists that Nina's story *is* a tragedy, because she never gets to accompany her husband or embark upon parallel adventures of her own—and then spends several decades wondering what happened to Percy and Jack. Did you see the film in these terms? Are gender codes only restricting Nina, or are they a pressure on Percy, too?

No Drama: In its editing, soundtrack, and photography, *The Lost City of Z* consistently avoids opportunities for Big Drama. Early on, Percy and Costin scale the highest peaks in Bolivia and survey land that no European ever had, but rather than emphasize the height and beauty of the mountains, as a movie like *The Mission* certainly would, Gray treats the whole event in one flat, mundane shot. Rarely do the high points (“*Z* is nearby!”) or low ones (“We must turn back!”) get treated with triumphant or tragic surges of music. The editing stays at an even pace throughout, rather than separate major climaxes from other scenes. Why do you think the movie avoids the kind of inflated dramatics that tales of exotic adventure often embrace?

Specific touches worth discussing...

Opening: The movie starts with the sounds of birds and insects over a black screen. After a swell of strings, we see a small, firelit “iris” within a screen that's still mostly black. Within that light we see some of the indigenous Amazonians who will later carry Percy and Jack to their death in a nighttime ceremony. What does it mean that *The Lost City of Z* essentially “starts” in the jungle, and in this particular scene? Was Percy's journey always fated to carry him here?

Sound: After the title appears, we hear a steady beat of drums that we are likely to associate with the Amazonian tribespeople we see on screen—only to discover that these drums are actually being played as part of the 1905 stag hunt in County Cork, which launches the story. Why might the film subtly link the puffed-up ceremony of the fox hunt to the Amazonian spectacle? (It might also be notable that Gray and Khondji film County Cork with a distinctive green and yellow cast of light—similar to some of the tints we later see in the Amazonian sequences.)

Acting: Hunnam doesn't even crack a smile as Percy looks down on the stag he has shot—maybe out of sympathy with the animal, but also possibly signaling to us that Percy already *knows* he will not be given credit by the aristocratic establishment for beating them at their own game.

Costumes: I am not above swooning at an Englishman in a uniform, and the scene of the Fawcetts preparing for the ball spurs us to admire Percy's figure in his military dress (while pitying Nina for having to squeeze into her suffocating corset). We learn, though, that all Percy sees in his outfit is the conspicuous lack of medals—a good cue to see costuming details as significant.

Framing and Editing: The scene where the Royal Geographical Society officers recruit Percy into the mapmaking effort in Brazil and Bolivia would be easy to mount in one or two long, still shots, especially given the stiff, formal nature of his appointment with them. Instead, the scene is subtly constructed out of several different shots from different high and low angles, with no one character always in the center or at the edges of the screen. This constant rotation of shots is one way to see how the characters are effectively “circling” each other or fighting for control of the moment and of Percy's fate, even as conversation stays primly polite.

Production Design: At the start of the scene where Percy and Nina lounge in the grass, discussing his imminent departure for Brazil, the camera films the opening shot from the other side of a low rock wall that marks the boundary of the park. This is a subtle reminder of the mania for land enclosure and border demarcation that had reorganized England at home and also driven its colonial adventures abroad over the previous centuries—yet another way in which the film subtly links the explicit plot points from the Amazon to the “civilized” culture of the U.K.

Fetch!: There is something tender in how Percy plays with his very young son Jack in this scene, but also something vaguely pet-like in the way he throws a ball for Jack to go “fetch”—a sign, perhaps that he is an enthusiastic and well-meaning parent but not a totally comfortable one.

Millinery: I don't really have anything to say about Sienna Miller's hats in this film except Wow!

Editing: The shot of Costin's liquor running toward a drain cuts to a Brazilian train carrying our protagonists in the same direction through the landscape. This kind of “match cut” makes two disparate images look unexpectedly similar by juxtaposing them. Two famous examples are the cut from a match that Peter O'Toole blows out to the blinding sun in *Lawrence of Arabia* and one from a bone thrown in the air to a long, white ship drifting through space in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. It's no coincidence that Gray's match cut links *Z* to those two epic journeys.

Language: Most of the indigenous Amazonians we meet in Fazenda Jacobina—those who become guides, at least—already speak a version of Spanish, reminding us that these English imperial emissaries are working in a region already marked by Spanish and Portuguese colonialism.

Contrivance: You may have wondered about the ease with which letters from Nina keep reaching Percy on his voyage, even when he's in the middle of the river, or other moments where plot points seem a little convenient. Many of Gray's movies, especially this and *The Immigrant*, are overtly influenced by opera (note their soundtracks), and sometimes seem to reflect the non-realistic but expeditious and poetically “true” version of storytelling from that form.

Editing: The first trip up river—the film, incidentally, has *no* shots of the characters sailing down river or *with* the current—is edited together with a series of dissolves, where each image fades immediately into the next, as often happens in flashbacks or dream sequences. Many of the shots also catch the sun’s glare, and the light is often hazy or over-bright, another staple of dream or hallucinatory sequences. This trip upriver may also be a kind of psychic voyage.

Casting: Note that Gray and his casting directors have filled the boat with a black African man, an Australian, and stand-ins for other groups besides indigenous “guides” and English whites; the colonial-imperialist project is the work of many cultures, increasingly blending them together.

Necessity Is the Mother of Invention: The arrow attack on the boat is one of those scenes that feels like a big action climax but also a tad muted: it starts with a slow, quiet shot, ends with a soft fade or dissolve, and never gets as frantically edited or loudly scored as most scenes of this type. Meanwhile, Gray solves the problem of how to shoot a logistically complicated attack on a tiny budget by using so many images of Percy tangled in his own fish nets underwater, as the water starts filling with blood—a creatively expressive image I’d never seen, despite watching many movies in this genre, and less complex to shoot than all the frantic action above him.

Music: The classical music excerpts that Z includes often have a peculiar character, not “building” to a crescendo or “settling” into a decrescendo. The piece does not seem to progress forward, gather strength, or dissipate but to do all three things at once. This is true, for example, at the moment Percy finds the human figure carved into the stone and tree trunk—as if this moment is the beginning but also the ending of something, the start of a new journey but also the confused middle of one. This same Ravel music, dynamic but static, will repeat at the end.

Framing: Gray cuts to a close-up of Percy at the tumultuous R.G.S. meeting, urging his colleagues to pursue archaeology rather than mere mapmaking—an early sign in the camerawork that his speech is gathering some persuasive power. Indeed, he soon appears to have a stronger hold on his audience. This technique can also backfire on Percy, though; the camera will later zoom into a close-up on James Murray shivering in the forest, as he says, “You don’t give a whit about me or about any of the party. You don’t even care about going home.” Is he correct?

Dialogue: “Are you insisting on mythical kingdoms of gold??” William Barclay calls out from the floor of the R.G.S. meeting, reminding us that this pre-World War I era already viewed “lost cities of gold” as a romantic delusion of past explorers, not a contemporary obsession.

Sound and Production Design: We hear thunder and rain throughout the scene where Percy and Nina fight over whether she can join him on the next jungle adventure, reinforcing the conflict in the scene. As they continue quarreling, you might also notice the dense floral pattern of their bedroom wallpaper—a pale domestic echo of the thick rainforest milieu Nina can’t visit. The window of their bedroom is also porthole-shaped, invoking the sea voyage she won’t take.

Sound: These kinds of adventure stories often use opera (as in *Fitzcarraldo*) or devotional choir music (as in *The Mission*) as emblems of European culture that dazzle or subdue “the natives.” So it’s noteworthy that when Percy implores his men to sing “Soldiers of the Queen” to halt another arrow attack and assuage the nearby tribe, everyone is out of tune and out of sync.

Costumes: The chief of this tribe wears a floppy fedora, which may be a gift from Percy, given before we enter the scene, or it could be a sign of other Europeans he has previously met.

Character Detail: Though Jack will later berate his father for not caring enough about his wife or children, it feels significant that Percy gets angriest with James Murray when he discovers that the latter has eaten all the chocolates he bought for his family. *That* betrayal gets to him.

Costumes: During their last talk before James Murray is sent away on horseback, he is swathed in a black-and-white blanket in a simple diagonal pattern, whereas Percy, more smitten with the Amazon, has wrapped himself in an earth-toned blanket of more obviously indigenous design.

Production Design: After the second trip, the Fawcetts have moved to a nicer, older, isolated property of their own. Moreover, their old stone house is covered in vines and surrounded on all sides by huge trees—and sheets of mist and rain are sweeping through the air. The film has done almost everything it can to link this English homestead to the jungle environment. (When he returns home from the Royal Geographical Society meeting that goes so badly, the analogy will be even more emphatic, as the soundtrack fills with jungly chirping birds and insects.)

Costumes: Remember when the film trained us early to close-read Percy's costumes? He is suddenly wearing a signet pinky ring he didn't used to sport (sign of upward mobility?) and he attends the ill-fated R.G.S. meeting with a new ascot. The fabric has a green jungle design.

Editing: Another match cut! This time from an Amazonian spear in the Fawcett household, most likely a souvenir, to a bayonet mounted over a World War I trench to deter enemy approaches. Once again, the film has found a way to tie “modern” and “primitive” objects together.

Cinematography: As Fawcett, Costin, and Manley reunite in the English bunker near the Somme (another case of narrative unlikelihood that feels more operatic than realistic), the entrance/exit glows inordinately brightly. Even more oddly, the light inside the trench doesn't seem to come solely from this portal, even though it couldn't easily originate anywhere else. This is not unusual in *The Lost City of Z*, where light sources are sometimes realistic and at other times quite theatrical or impossible; at earlier moments, for example, huge rooms seemed lit by single bulbs. This is another way the movie straddles a line between realism and myth. Shots like this one, with single, furiously bright “ways out” from otherwise dark, heavy spaces remind me repeatedly of Percy's mental space: often feeling trapped, dreaming of an exit.

The Medium: Speaking of blurring reality and myth, the Slavic fortune-teller is another character who seems imported from opera. As she divines Percy's yearning for a “forest,” the shot changes such that Percy and the medium are surrounded by jungle vegetation, rather than the bunker. Gray uses this trick a few more times before the movie's end, as Percy pines more often for the Amazon, and it starts to carry metaphoric weight for other characters, too.

Acting: As Percy gives his speech to rouse his fellow soldiers in their trench, his accent strikes me as having shifted—there is a curious blend of more posh-sounding vowels that reflect his new and aspirational social status with working-class English vowels that feel more rooted in his modest origins. This is a clever way for Hunnam to signal Percy's ambiguous station.

Dramatic Irony: Percy is nonplussed at the magazine journalist's news that several Americans have pursued exploration in South America, spurred by Percy's adventures—but we cut from this scene of Percy denigrating U.S. gun culture to Jack doing target practice with his rifle.

Music: After disappearing for a while, the romantic, agitated string chords (including, again, those from Ravel's *Daphnis and Chloé*) start resurfacing as Jack proposes going back to Brazil.

Perspective: By the third trip to the Amazon, there are multiple signals that this has become as much a mental, imaginative, and/or spiritual space for Percy as an actual locale. First, as the train pulls out of the English station, he looks out the window and seems to "see" his wife and young children sleeping in their beds outside. Then, the camera seems to *pan* over in a fast but continuous movement from England to Brazil, as though the two spaces are barely separate. As Jack and Percy approach the now-decrepit opera house in Fazenda Jacobina, we can still hear the echoes of the operas they used to perform. Realist boundaries are all breaking down.

Self-Reflexive Cinema: As Percy takes photos of Jack among the Guaraní, Gray's lens zooms in on Percy's, calling attention to cameras and cinema as being part of the imperial technology that white Europeans brought into the Amazon—responsible for the film we're seeing now.

Music: As Percy and Jack make their way through more of the jungle, those beautiful but frustrated movements in Ravel's *Daphnis and Chloé* that we have heard in many earlier moments throughout the movie (especially in the Amazon) finally resolve into satisfying culminations. This is an ill-fated excursion, but there is still a *musical* sense that the Fawcetts are attaining a kind of completion they have long sought. (You can hear the second suite of *Daphnis and Chloé* here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=amGI9Qmgu7E>)

More Dramatic Irony: This story that began with the fateful stag hunt reaches its conclusion with the rival tribes' pursuit and capture of Percy and Jack, a sequence that mirrors the earlier one.

Dialogue and Revelation: "So much of life is a mystery, my boy," Percy says to his son Jack, as they seem to be prepared for a ritual death. "But you and I have made a journey that most men cannot even imagine. And this has brought understanding to our hearts." Not long before this, he assures Jack, "Nothing will happen to us that is not our destiny." Have you understood Percy before now to be invested in questions of destiny, or in achieving inner "understanding"? If so, when did you start feeling this way? If not, what do these speeches mean to you?

The Final Shot: Gray filmed the final shot of Nina walking down the staircase and "into the jungle" 23 times, largely because of technical challenges. The camera had to make a tracking movement *away* from the character while still making clear what is happening to her and where she is going, and doing so through a mirrored reflection. Gray is increasingly famous for final shots that encompass all the conflicts in the movie; *The Immigrant* also ends this way. What did you think of this closing image? Did it change what you thought of the film?

Music: As the end credits begin, we hear a waltz, calling back to that formal ball after the hunt. Then we hear another orchestral piece, heavy with harps, then military drums, then a bagpipe piece that recalls the stag hunt . . . but we eventually end with darkness and jungle sounds.