

THE AMAZON JOURNAL STUDY GUIDE
--a resource for using the film and the book in the classroom --

INTRODUCTION:

In the book “Amazon Journal: Dispatches from a Vanishing Frontier” and in the documentary film of the same title, Geoffrey O'Connor describes his first hand experiences as a filmmaker/media journalist covering issues of land use and the indigenous people of the Brazilian Amazon between 1987 and 1997. The process of making films on these issues brings him into contact with various groups and conflicting realities causing him to raise several complicated and perplexing questions about the impact of development on the Amazon and its inhabitants. Simultaneously, O'Connor documents his own motivations and cultural expectations as a North American trying to understand the various actors in a process that eludes an easy explanation. The book and film raise issues from current debates in several disciplines including: cultural anthropology, journalism, international development and policy studies, environmental studies and documentary film.

The following is a list of questions and a bibliography that can be used alternatively for classroom discussions, essay exams or term paper projects that incorporate both the book and the film as part of a course curriculum.

Discussion Questions:

1) There are various competing interest groups who are actively involved (intentionally or unintentionally) in determining a course for the Amazon. Who are the different groups? Outline the agenda and social/political/economic motivation for each group's interest in the Amazon. Take the point of view of each group and project what might be the outcome for the Amazon and its inhabitants if this group's course of action were followed.

International development and policy studies, anthropology, environmental studies:

2) Postmodern scholars have deconstructed and analyzed western civilization's notions and images of the "primitive." In literature, art, anthropology and visual media the "primitive" is variously depicted as exotic, sexual, dangerous, barbaric, and noble. Using examples from the book, discuss further their own agendas. What impact does the perpetuation of these stereotypes have on the indigenous groups themselves?

Anthropology, international development, journalism:

3) Throughout history the expansion of the white Europeans and Americans into new territories has had tragic and disastrous impacts on the indigenous populations occupying the area. Is the case of the Amazon yet another example of the history repeating itself or is there a model for development that could be applied here that would be less destructive. How can indigenous populations be acculturated into the dominant culture or should they be left alone? Argue and support one or the other position. In your argument consider who should make the decision about policy towards indigenous groups and how should that decision be reached.

Anthropology, international development and policy studies:

4) Using examples from the book, discuss the various outside groups with 'good intentions' towards the Amazon and what impact their efforts have had on the Amazonian Indians. To what extent are these 'good intentions and solutions' actually based in the reality of the indigenous populations? How have they backfired and why?

International development, journalism, anthropology, environmental studies:

5) Media journalists and anthropologists are often faced with a similar ethical and professional dilemma in the act of documenting and recording people and cultures undergoing stress; whether to remain an objective observer or to intervene and advocate on the behalf of the people or culture being documented. Discuss the pros and cons of both positions and consequences of taking one position over the other. As a journalist and documentary filmmaker how does the author handle this dilemma? Give some examples from the book.

Journalism, anthropology, documentary film:

6) Susan Sontag has stated that "a photograph that brings news of some unsuspected zone of misery cannot make a dent in the public opinion unless it is in an appropriate context of feeling and attitude" (On Photography 2001). Discuss how this statement applies to the media coverage of the Amazonian Indians described in Amazon Journal.

7) Susan Sontag has written "To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge and therefore, like power," (On Photography 1977). Using examples from the book, discuss how this statement applies to the use of video by journalists covering the Amazon, Amazonian Indians themselves and the author.

Journalism, documentary film, visual anthropology:

8) Has the author (as a journalist and observer) objectively represented all the competing points of the view in the book? Does he offer a solution or alternative? What has the writer concluded about the problem? How has the writer been changed by the experience of documenting this "vanishing frontier," What has he learned about himself and his own culture through this experience?

Suggested reading:

Books:

- 1) "On Photography," Sontag, Susan. Picador Press, 2001.
- 2) "Europe and the People without History" – Wolf, Eric. University of California Press, 1982.
- 3) "Victims of the Miracle," Davis, Shelton. Cambridge University Press, 1988.
- 4) "Culture and Imperialism," - Said, Edward. Vintage, 1994.
- 5) "Simulations," Baudrillard, Jean. Semiotext(e), Inc. 1983.
- 6) "The Ecstasy of Communication," Baudrillard, Jean. Editions Galilee, 1987.
- 7) "On Television," Bourdieu, Pierre. The New Press, 1998.
- 8) "Amazon Frontier," Hemming, John. Macmillian (London), 1987.
- 9) "Red Gold: The Conquest of Brazilian Indians," Hemming, John. Papermac, 1987.
- 10) "Open Veins of Latin America: Frive Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent," Galeano, Eduardo. Monthly Review Press, 1973.
- 11) "Indigenism: Ethnic Politics in Brazil," Ramos, Alcida. University of Wisconsin Press, 1998.

Articles:

- 1) "Eye on the Amazon: Brazilian Indians, the State and Global

Culture." By Laura R. Graham in the "American Anthropologist," 100 (1):163-169.

2) "The Hypereal Indian" by Alcida Ramos

3) "From Eden to Limbo: The Construction of Indigenism in Brazil" by Alcida Ramos.

4) "Representing, Resisting, Rethinking: Historical Transformations of Kayapo Culture and Anthropological Analysis," article by Terence Turner published in "Rethinking History and Myth," Edited by Hill, Jonathan, University of Illinois Press, 1988.

5) "La Fumee du Metal: Histoire de contact chez les Yanomami (Bresil)," Albert, Bruce.