

Warriors of the Amazon.

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The Peacock Report noted that one allegation requiring inquiry by the El Dorado Task force was a report that “a film crew allegedly watched a woman and child die during a NOVA documentary filmed with the assistance of [Jacques] Lizot.” This film is currently entitled “Warriors of the Amazon,” and is distributed by NOVA/WGBH. The date on the current edition of the videocassette version is 1996, and Jacques Lizot is listed as ethnographic advisor to the film. Several versions of the film seem to exist. Tierney observes that a BBC version, entitled “Survivors of the Amazon,” also dated 1996, “showed more of the film crew’s impact on Karohi-teri (Tierney 2000:219-20). (We note that the NOVA version does include a sequence of a headman mentioning that goods received from the film crew will be used for trade during the feast, and that these include “machetes, axes, hammocks, cotton for fixing arrow feathers, and money.”)

Task Force member Hames has identified yet a third version of the film, listed as shown at a Margaret Mead Film Festival at USC in 1995, with the following information:

Spirits of the Rainforest - (Venezuela)

Andy Jillings, Jacques Lizot. 1993. 50 minutes.

The Yanomami of Venezuela invite their enemies to settle old scores and feast. When sickness and sudden death threaten the preparations shamans call upon healing powers from the spirit world, but their traditional defense offers no protection against new diseases carried by gold prospectors.

<http://www.usc.edu/dept/elab/mead/mead95/desc95.html>

Members of the Task Force have viewed only the NOVA/WGBH “Warriors of the Amazon” and in this preliminary report will remark only on that film. The author of the narration for the film is Melanie Wallace, who produced several films in the *Odyssey* series (Trailer, “Warriors of the Amazon”). A transcript of the narration of the film as it was aired on PBS September 2, 1997 can be found at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/transcripts/2309warr.html>.

Sponsel (1998:99) states that “Among the several dozen films and videos on the Yanomami, in my opinion by far the most balanced and humanistic is *Warriors of the Amazon*, which Lizot made in collaboration with the television science series *Nova*.” This is the film that was viewed by Task Force members.

The film unquestionably has some very compelling footage, and has as well the redeeming feature of giving at least brief voice to a Yanomami woman about her decision to run away from her village. However, the Task Force concurs with Tierney that the film is profoundly problematic. It is particularly problematic given that NOVA/WGBH is obviously marketing it to schoolteachers; the NOVA web site (see above) includes a selection of lesson ideas and supplementary materials to accompany the film (it can be purchased for \$19.95 from amazon.com).

First, the film, made in the 1990’s, is obviously staged (Tierney enumerates a number of pieces of evidence for this (Tierney 2000:216-217). The film is incongruous in that while it shows many trade goods, the Yanomami wear almost no western clothes (one or two men in shorts are shown). Task Force member Hames states that one of the most striking incongruities of the film for him is the sight of so many shotguns and the sound of so much firing, since most Yanomami communities have few shotguns and are careful of ammunition. In spite of the fact that one of the film’s themes is diseases brought by contact, the narration of the film’s introductory trailer states that the film will bring “a rare and intimate glimpse of an isolated tribe. Explore the unique culture of the Yanomami, from the role of powerful hallucinogenics to the ritualistic consumption of their dead, witness the human drama of a people on the brink of extinction. Can they make peace with their enemies before it’s too late? *Warriors of the Amazon*.” The film builds to a climax with the funeral of a woman and the statement that four people died while the film was being made. This narration reiterates themes of primordiality, isolation, cannibalism, and extinction that have endured for hundreds of years in representations of the indigenous peoples of the Americas.

The narration continues stating that the Yanomami world is “marked by aggression and revenge”, and that the Yanomami “live in ways similar to their ancestors of two thousand years ago, following age old traditions...”. As noted above, the filmed scenes accompanying this essentializing narration support it

in every detail. Interestingly, the narration, which follows a plot line where a Yanomami village reconciles with enemies, has the headman stating that the fight started over an adultery, with the narrator reiterating this point: “Instances of adultery are common, but when it takes place among members of different groups, what begins as a personal affront can quickly escalate into a conflict among villages. And here, vengeance is not easily satisfied.”

One of several narrative threads in the film is the sickness and death of a very young woman, who had recently given birth, and her baby. Tierney characterizes these sequences as “memorable, beautiful, marketable, ... inevitable ... images of [an] Amazon Madonna.” He argues that the representation of this death was one of the many metaphoric and literal references in the film to “Indians as losers in the Darwinian struggle” (Tierney 2000:222). We concur.

The images of the dying young mother and her baby are problematic in at least two more ways. Before proceeding, we note that Tierney leaves the impression that the filming of the death is long and voyeuristic; in fact the shots are very short in the context of the film’s pacing. This may very well be due to the fact that taking pictures of a dying person, even more of a dying infant, and even more especially of a dead person, must have enormously upset the Yanomami. Task Force member Hames believes that it must have taken an enormous amount of trade goods to overcome their objections and permit the film makers to quickly grab a few shots.

The second way in which the death is immensely problematic is that it is filmed as a moment in “nature.” Tierney states that the film was made only an hour by motorboat from the infirmary at the Mavaca mission (Tierney 2000:221). Hames states that this is an exaggeration; the distance might be as much as 3 1/2 hours, depending on conditions and mode of transportation. Nonetheless it would have been easy to take the woman, who is quite young, perhaps even still a teenager, to the hospital. Tierney reports that a government doctor visited the woman, but did not have proper equipment to treat her. This scene, which would have interrupted the film’s vision of wilderness isolation, is not shown. Nor is the film crew shown as intervening in any way; Tierney quotes an American missionary, Mike Dawson, as saying, “Let’s be real. They’re giving them machetes, cooking pots, but they can’t give a dying woman aspirin to bring her fever down?” (Tierney 2000:217).

One member of the Task Force reacted initially by proposing that the AAA request that the film be withdrawn from circulation. The Task Force decided not to make such a proposal, but we remain faced with the problem of reflecting on how the film might possibly be made meaningful. Perhaps its most important lesson is not about the Yanomami at all, but about exactly the power of a representation in which the Yanomami are more part of “nature” than of “culture”; we are reminded of Charles Briggs’ work on the cholera epidemic in the early 1990’s among the Warao, where Briggs (1997:447) interviewed a Venezuelan health official who stated that “The Indians – they’re people who accept death as a normal, natural event in their lives. And when an Indian dies, it’s not anything transcendent: an Indian dies and nothing happens. Or, let’s say, there isn’t, there isn’t this, uh, fondness for life, or anything like that”. This representation is sufficiently constitutive of the affective state of the film crew that they are apparently able to maintain complete non-interventionist detachment, taking much the same position of fatalism as if they had observed the death of a mother and infant baboon on the African savannah. Had they filmed the same sort of footage in, say, Glasgow, San Diego, or Osaka, we believe that the tone of the film would be one of intense attention to finding help for the sick woman. There is a grim lesson here for us all: decent ordinary people, in the grip of a racializing representation that the film reproduces in almost every dimension, can behave in ways that deeply shocked members of the Task Force as well as Tierney and his informants and that must have been a dehumanizing experience for the Yanomami.

We are concerned, unfortunately, that it will be difficult to use the film in classes in such a way as to bring students to confront this issue. Since every shot and almost every narrative moment in it powerfully reproduces a racializing and dehumanizing representation, it seems likely that extensive preparation and deep teaching and discussion at an almost psychotherapeutic level would be required to overcome its power with many of our students. Certainly nothing in the NOVA material for teachers (which include cheery lesson plans about “the rain forest”) even remotely engages what we see as the film’s most fundamental lesson. Tierney’s chapter might be one teaching tool that could be used with the film; his analysis is clear and revealing.