

# STUDY GUIDE



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## SECRETS FROM PUTOMAYO

A film by AURELIO MICHILES

Brazil / 2020 / 83 min  
Portuguese, English, Spanish with English subtitles

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[www.pragda.com](http://www.pragda.com)

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# BEFORE WATCHING THE FILM:

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The rubber boom began in the mid-nineteenth century, when Charles Goodyear discovered the vulcanization of rubber – a process that allows rubber to withstand heat and cold to produce a rubberized material with excellent rigidity and durability. With the invention of tires by John Dunlop in 1888 and Henry Ford's mass production of automobiles a few decades later, the need for rubber became extremely pressing.

The rubber tree grew exclusively in the Amazon basin, and soon a rubber rush was on. Entrepreneurs and fortune-seekers set off into the jungle, determined to cash in. This led to the impending disaster in which tens of thousands of Indians, for whom the western Amazon was home, experienced their last years of peace.

The Putumayo genocide refers to the enslavement and massacres of the indigenous population of the Amazon at the hands of the Peruvian Amazon Company during the Amazon rubber boom period from 1879 to 1912. The Peruvian government and Peruvian Amazon Company subjected the indigenous communities to collect rubber in inhuman conditions and if they did not meet the required amounts, they were punished to death or were disappeared into distant camps. 90% of the affected Amazonian populations were killed in these camps <sup>1</sup>.

Before watching a film, it is important to know the current events and history of the country that film comes from. Learning about the filmmaker is also a relevant way to gain insight on the context in which the film was produced. You can learn more about Aurelio Michiles at <https://pragda.com/film/secrets-from-putumayo/>.

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## INTRODUCING THE FILM

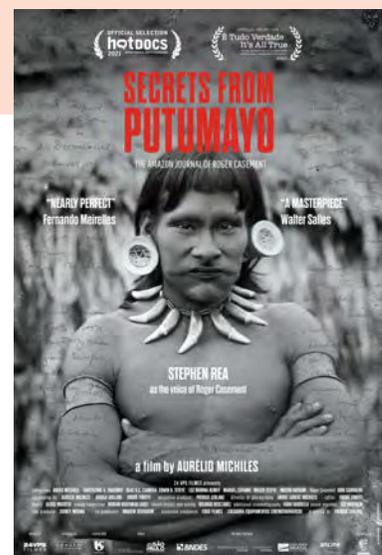
A **film synopsis** is a piece of text designed to summarize the film's narrative, genre, style, and key participants in a way that appeals to a wide audience. The synopsis is part of the film's marketing process and tends to follow a traditional format. Read this synopsis for *Secrets from Putumayo*:

This is a documentary about the man widely considered to be the pioneer of international human rights inquiries, Roger Casement (1864-1916). His work in Africa, Brazil, and his native Ireland still has repercussions today.

In 1910, the British Consul General in Rio de Janeiro, Roger Casement, undertook an investigation into allegations of crimes against indigenous communities committed by the British-registered Peruvian Amazon Company. Narrated from his journals, *Secrets from Putumayo* recounts the horrific treatment he uncovered there: an industrial-extractive system based on killings and slave labor in the midst of the Amazon rainforest, "a real green hell." Shocked by his discoveries, and despite a heavy personal toll, Casement was determined to bring awareness to the British of their own colonial atrocities by revealing the appalling human cost of the rubber industry. Blending unflinching passages from his journal (powerfully narrated by Stephen Rea) with unforgettable archival images, the film makes space for the Indigenous relatives of the survivors to share the oral stories passed down by the family members, who also recount current struggles for self-determination against today's multinational corporations, just as fixated on extracting the resources of the Amazon.

Casement's pursuit of justice continued when he returned to his native Ireland where he became an active Irish nationalist, to be executed for treason during World War I by the British government.

- ❑ From the film synopsis, can you imagine the genre and tone of the film? From this same text, try to identify the main events of the film's plot and the socio-political context of the film.
- ❑ Do you think that the film will have a political message? Cite specific language from the synopsis to support your answer.
- ❑ How do the trailer, poster, and still images encourage you to watch the film?
- ❑ Viewing the marketing materials alone (i.e. trailer, poster, and still images available at <https://pragda.com/film/secrets-from-putumayo/> without the aid of the synopsis, can you make any assumptions regarding what the film is about?



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<sup>1</sup> Farje, Javier, 2012, "The Putumayo Atrocities", *Latin American Bureau*, October 25, 2012, accessed July 29, 2022, from <https://lab.org.uk/the-putumayo-atrocities/>.

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## AFTER WATCHING THE FILM:

### NARRATIVE

- ❑ Considering two scenes in which you felt profound empathy for the native Indians, how does the film successfully evoke empathy in the viewer?
- ❑ Describe the relationship between the Europeans and the natives with specific details from the film.
- ❑ Who do you think is the film's protagonist? How is this protagonist similar or different from the protagonist in other documentary films you have seen?
- ❑ Reflect on how the film moves back and forth from archival to present-day footage. How is time constructed in the film? Is it linear or non-linear? Give examples.
- ❑ The film uses cut-aways that stand alone. For example, at one point, we see an image of a fish out of water, gasping for air. At another point we see a child with a mirror. What do these images signify? What emotions do they create?
- ❑ What is the significance of the last few scenes? Why do you think the director chose to end the film like this? Do you think it was a suitable ending to the film? Explain.
- ❑ In the final scenes of the film, Roger Casement's remains are paraded down the streets of Dublin. Shots of Irish men and women are intercut with South American natives. What message does this montage relay? What emotions do these scenes evoke in you? What is the filmmaker trying to say about the Irish experience of colonization?

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### CINEMATIC TECHNIQUES

- ❑ The film uses black and white archival photographs and film footage. Why do you think the filmmakers decided to also shoot modern times in black and white?
- ❑ What emotions and associations does the choice of black and white evoke in you as a viewer?
- ❑ Describe the film's cinematography in general and its use of modern techniques like drone shots in particular. Do these new techniques add to the meaning of the film, or do they distract the viewer? Explain your answer.
- ❑ In the beginning of the film, we see a series of photographs of people with mutilated body parts. The editing is a series of quick, sharp cuts. How does this sequence help to set the tone of the film? In what ways do the photographs help the viewer to know what to expect?
- ❑ How would you describe the film's editing? Are archival and modern-day footage edited together to look seamless? How so?
- ❑ How are still photographs edited together with moving images?
- ❑ Consider the scene in which we hear the sound of a dog barking mixed with voice over describing native Indians carrying rubber. Later in the film we hear the dog barking again as the narrator describes the atrocities natives endured. What emotions does the sound of the dog barking create in these scenes?



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## CINEMATIC TECHNIQUES *(continued)*

- Reflect on the sequence when we hear the sound of lightning and thunder while the voice-over talks about death caused by starvation. At another point in the film, we hear the whispering voices of women. Illustrate with similar examples, how the film uses sound and to what effects.
- Why do you think the filmmaker decided to tell this story in the form of a documentary? How do you think the spectator's experience with the film would change if it were a fictional narrative?
- Try to think about two or three shots that really spoke to you. What in particular about them is significant? Why specifically do they stick out in your mind?
- When is music used in the film? What type of music is used and why do you suspect it was chosen?

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## THEMES

- "All are equally citizens of the democratic federations, apart from black people. In Brazil, color counts for caste." What is the meaning of these statements in the film? Have things changed in the times we live in?
- "Morals go when clothes come." What is the meaning of this statement in the film? What did clothing signify for the Indians working for Europeans?
- What impact did Roger Casement's diary and inner thoughts as he took the journey have on him?
- What are the main themes and the central message or messages of the film?
- How would you compare *Secrets from Putumayo* to other films portraying native Indian stories?
- Is this a political film? Why or why not?
- What does the Amazon jungle represent in the modern world?
- Did you find yourself relating to the stories of Indian exploitation? How do you think these stories have affected lives in the western world? Think of examples from your own life.
- In the film, we learn the name Brazil comes from an Irish word meaning mythical island connoting a place where everyone smiled and was happy. Why was this name originally used?
- "Amazon, Congo, there is no limit to human sufferings." Considering this quotation from the film, have things changed in these places? Why or why not?
- Native Indians call the rubber plant a devil plant. What does the rubber plant/forest mean to the locals?
- At the end of the film, Roger Casement says the only way to change systems of exploitation in Ireland and in Putumayo is through an armed insurrection. Give examples of similar situations around the world.

