

Stephen Nugent's *Scoping the Amazon: Image, Icon, Ethnography*

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Nugent, Stephen. *Scoping the Amazon: Image, Icon, Ethnography*. Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2007. 264 pages, illustrated edition. \$65.00 cloth; \$29.95 paper.



Scoping the Amazon is anthropologist Stephen Nugent's fourth book dealing with the Amazonian region, following *Big Mouth* (1990), *Amazonian Caboclo Society* (1993), and *Some Other Amazonians* (2004). In his latest work he seeks to reflect on how the field of anthropology has used images, especially photography, when studying the Amazon. In this sense, this is a meta-ethnographic book, which seeks to discuss the construction of a field throughout history, instead of presenting the results of a particular ethnographic research project. Furthermore, his objects of research are for the most part scholarly books and the images they contain. The scope of the book transcends the specificities of a discipline; there seems to be a continuum (and not an opposition) between how photographs are read within the context of anthropology books, and how these images relate to some conventional ideas about the Amazon. Nugent identifies the latter as a powerful and resilient “cliché/stereotype” and one of his strongest claims is that, to a great extent, this stereotype is sustained and reproduced by many images that appear in professional ethnographies.

What are the function and status of the image within the field of anthropology? One of the theoretical ideas that permeates Nugent's argument is that images are contingent and require contextual information. The book reflects, thus, on the problematic relations between images and captions (and texts in general), considering the latter as an interpretative appropriation of the former, but also sometimes as a way of reproducing the cliché. In this respect, the author

appears profoundly skeptical of the idea that images possess an autonomous language or grammar.

Nugent traces the use of images through scholarly literature written in English about Brazilian Amazonia. He tallies the number of images contained in each book and calculates the ratio between text and images, and classifies the images thematically as labor, leisure, portrait, ritual, or historical. He concludes that, within this bibliography, images have a largely ornamental, though stereotype-producing, function. The author seems to be aware of some of the problems involved in these methodological options. After confessing that non-English books were excluded “largely for language reasons,” he justifies this exclusion on the grounds that the Anglo-American tradition in anthropology has followed a very singular path, clearly different from the Brazilian tradition (116). While this is not objectionable, the inclusion of the Portuguese-language scholarship (and its comparison with English-language work) could constitute a field to explore in subsequent research.

Nugent offers an in-depth discussion of the cliché/stereotype of Amazonian imagery, explaining the different forms it has adopted from a diachronic perspective. Initially, it is connected to the idea of the “green hell” or the permanent frontier as a space that remains undiscovered and untamed. Nugent identifies 19th century travelers and adventurers as the founders of this trope, and connects it historically with the rubber boom, which lasted for almost a century and molded social and economic relations in the region. The second moment of stereotype originates in the work of professional ethnographers and presents the image of the hunter-gatherer as the typical lifestyle of the Amazonian Indian. Against this homogenizing belief, Nugent goes on to argue that since the conquest the region has become a space of dialogue and mixture of complex cultures, not the home to isolated, rudimentary, or “timeless” peoples. He locates a third stereotypical moment in representations of Amazonia in Hollywood films and popular media, including B-movies, “serious” cinema such as *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* by Werner Herzog (1972), or *At Play in the Fields of the Lord* by Hector Babenco (1991), as well as *The Lost World* (1925), based on Arthur Conan Doyle's eponymous novel.

The echoes of this novel have produced, Nugent argues, the impression of an infernal jungle, a “green hell” which remains hidden, undiscovered by civilization. Towards the end of the book he proposes a second meaning derived from the title of Conan Doyle's novel which characterizes Amazonia not as a preserved past, but rather as an uncertain future. He suggests that this is a world that is disappearing from our sight in alarming ways. Ultimately, Nugent argues that the different stereotyping operations that take place within and beyond professional literature constitute a complex and powerful process of rendering Amazonia and its concrete inhabitants invisible. Moreover, this process threatens to transform Conan Doyle's title into an imminent reality. By putting forward the ways in which his own field has reproduced stereotypes of Amazonia when claiming to do the opposite and by questioning the very status of photographs in ethnography, Nugent decisively and insightfully complicates the relationship

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between disciplinary research and popular belief.

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