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LOTHAR BAUMGARTEN - WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

By Margaret Sundell (December 2003)

"Ambivalent." The word flashes briefly on-screen toward the end of Lothar Baumgarten's 1973-77 film *The Origin of the Night: Amazon Cosmos*, a lush, ninety-eight-minute meditation on the rain forest inspired by a Tupi myth about the division of night and day. Although active since the early '70s, the German-born Baumgarten is best known in the United States for his 1993 Guggenheim exhibition in which a stately procession of names of indigenous North American peoples (Inuit, Iroquois, Huron, Crow . . .) was printed directly on the inner curves of Frank Lloyd Wright's famous rotunda. As critic Craig Owens noted, a penchant for proper nouns forms a unifying thread in Baumgarten's materially disparate oeuvre, which encompasses installation, slide projection, photography, sculpture, and text. Indeed, *The Origin of the Night* opens with a sequence of fifty-two names of tropical animals and plants. But it's an adjective-"ambivalent"-that lies at the heart of Baumgarten's first and only cinematic venture.

Baumgarten spent 1978 to 1980 with the Yanomami, but *The Origin of the Night* was shot before he'd set foot in a rain forest. It stands, therefore, as a faux document of the Amazon-one that hinges on an act of intentional misnaming. As viewers learn from the legend that scrolls on-screen in its final frame, the landscape Baumgarten has captured-complete with threatening thunderclouds, mosquito-filled waters, and dense vegetation-is no virgin territory at all but a tract of woodland near the Düsseldorf airport. It is also, quite clearly, a forest of symbols. Virtually every aspect of the work calls attention to its own status as representation: Images are obviously cropped or in extreme close-up; the sound track (droning insects and birdcalls, punctuated by the occasional tribal drum) is excessively amplified. Captions serve to confound more than to illustrate (some, such as "anticipated armadillos," are simply absurd; others, such as a reference to a character from *Finnegans Wake*, are inscrutable). But as much as these elements distance the viewer, the images themselves-verdant and slightly sinister-induce a trancelike state that's heightened by the absence of narrative and the glacial pace. In historical terms, *The Origin of the Night* marks a transitional moment, as a view of nature as an absolute, primordial other grew increasingly untenable and the consequences of its exploitation more and more apparent. In his film, Baumgarten tries to tackle both the power of our fantasies and their real ecological effects. It is perhaps for this reason that the nature he conjures seems at once sublime and in a state of decay.

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If "ambivalent" is the word that most effectively conveys Baumgarten`s oscillating attitude toward his subject, it also accurately describes at least this viewer`s response to watching his film close to thirty years after its creation. There is something obviously dated about *The Origin of the Night*-a quality apprehended almost subliminally through the coloration of its film stock and more overtly through its similarly distinctive combination of structuralist and phenomenological concerns: the reflexive emphasis on cinematic language, the equally self-conscious insistence on fostering a palpable experience of duration in the spectator. But if, in our era marked by dwindling attention spans and a general disregard for the politics of the signifier, Baumgarten`s work seems a bit of a fascinating relic, the issues it raises-from the inevitable imbrication of nature and culture to the limitations of photographic "truth"-have lost none of their force.

- *Margaret Sundell*