

The New York Times

## Big Oil's Stain In the Amazon

Because of concerns about climate change, a lot of current environmentalist advocacy — including movies like “An Inconvenient Truth” — concentrates on the dire results of burning fossil fuels. Joe Berlinger’s “Crude,” a thorough and impassioned

**A.O. SCOTT**  
**FILM REVIEW**  
new documentary, focuses its gaze on production rather than consumption. The film, which follows the fitful progress of a class-action lawsuit undertaken on behalf of the people of the Ecuadorean Amazon, is not about the unintended consequences of using petroleum. Instead, it examines the terrible, frequently unacknowledged costs of extracting oil from the ground.

“Crude,” in other words, investigates the local manifestations — cancer, contaminated water, cultural degradation — of a global problem. It also, more by what it shows than what it says, suggests

### Crude

Opens on Wednesday in Manhattan.

that such a distinction is no longer tenable.

Multinational corporations (like Chevron, this film’s designated villain) move money and commodities from one place to another, often with slight regard for the sovereignty or customs of any place in particular. And so the lawyers and activists who oppose these conglomerates have tried to become equally mobile and adaptable, moving continually in the zigzagging paths traced by transnational capitalism.

Even as “Crude” dwells on a single, relatively small slice of territory (about the size of Rhode Island), its action shifts from muddy villages in Amazonia to law offices and shareholders’ meetings in

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## Examining Big Oil’s Stain on Amazonian Ecuador, and the People Who Live There

From First Arts Page

the steel-and-glass cities of North America, drawing into its purview a motley cast of scientists, human rights crusaders, civil servants and international celebrities.

Like almost every other recent documentary on a politically charged topic, “Crude” does not pretend to neutrality. Yet while Mr. Berlinger’s sympathies clearly lie with the oddly matched pair of lawyers — Steven Donziger, a big, outgoing American, and Pablo Fajardo, a wiry, diffident Ecuadorean — who are consumed by the now 16-year-old suit against Chevron, he is fair-minded enough to include rebuttals from the company’s executives and in-house environmental scientists.

And since this is, in part, a courtroom drama, both sides have a chance to be heard. The Ecuadorean practice of conducting parts of the trial in the field generates some oddly theatrical moments as lawyers deliver florid, impromptu speeches *al fresco*, in front of huts or at the edges of waste sites.

Too many filmmakers seem to think that a noble cause, a good heart and a digital video camera are all that is required for an effective documentary. Luckily, Mr. Berlinger has both a strong narrative instinct and a keen eye for incongruous, evocative and powerful images. His previous work includes the thoughtful true-crime stories “Brother’s Keeper” and “Paradise Lost” and also the superb heavy-metal psychodrama “Metallica: Some Kind of Monster.” What these films have



An Ecuadorean cancer victim’s reflection in an oil-polluted stream near her home, in an image from the documentary “Crude.”

in common with one another, and with “Crude,” which Mr. Berlinger worked on for three years, is a strong sense of character and an openness to the unexpected.

Even as this film presses its muckraking agenda, it does so with a welcome sense of human foible and contradiction. Mr. Fajardo, who worked in the oil fields as a young man, blames Chevron (current owner of Texaco, which

opened up his home region to drilling) for many of the ills that have befallen his family and his people. In the course of “Crude” he becomes something of a star in the Western news and enter-

tainment media, profiled in Vanity Fair, showered with awards and posing for pictures with Sting after a benefit concert.

Meanwhile, Chevron’s Ecuadorean lawyers portray the suit as a

### Crude

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Directed by Joe Berlinger; director of photography, Juan Diego Pérez; edited by Alyse Ardell Spiegel; music by Wendy Blackstone; produced by Mr. Berlinger, Michael Bonfiglio, J. R. Deleon and Richard Stratton; released by First Run Features. At the IFC Center, 323 Avenue of the Americas, at Third Street, Greenwich Village. In English, Spanish, A'ingae and Secoya, with English subtitles. Running time: 1 hour 45 minutes. This film is not rated.

### ONLINE: MORE ON ‘CRUDE’

A trailer for “Crude” and an article about the movie: [nytimes.com/movies](http://nytimes.com/movies)

money-making scheme bankrolled by a Manhattan law firm, and base their defense simultaneously on appealing to national pride and blaming the state-run petroleum company, which took over from Texaco in the early 1990s. The case takes an interesting swerve when Rafael Correa, a young economist with populist tendencies, is elected Ecuador’s president and publicly supports the plaintiffs’ position.

But “Crude” presents no easy resolution, since the legal struggle — and the public relations war between big companies and those who feel preyed upon by them — is unlikely to end soon. Behind that conflict lies a long and complicated history, and ahead of us lie many more documentaries similar in tone and spirit to this one. We can hope that at least a few of them are as intelligently and artfully made.

## CALENDAR

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 18, 2009 • LATIMES.COM/CALENDAR

## MOVIE REVIEWS

## MOVIE REVIEW

## 'Crude' goes behind the scenes of a fierce battle

Detailing a class-action lawsuit against Chevron reveals how campaigns are waged.

KENNETH TURAN  
FILM CRITIC

"Crude" sounds like the standard "this is an outrage" environmental degradation documentary, the latest in a line that includes "An Inconvenient Truth" and films about the death of the ocean, the evaporation of water, the murder of dolphins, even the disintegration of dirt. "Crude" fits that bill, but it is something considerably more interesting as well.

The outrage in question is the subject of a class-action suit filed by 30,000 citizens of Ecuador against Chevron, the world's fifth-largest corporation, alleging that 18 billion gallons of toxic wastewater were dumped into the Amazon between 1972 and 1990, fatally poisoning the land and water and sickening inhabitants. The lawsuit, with a potential cost to Chevron of \$27 billion, has been going on for so long, 16 years and counting, that the original American oil company in Ecua-

dor, Texaco, was acquired by Chevron and no longer exists.

Director Joe Berlinger ("Brothers Keeper," "Metallica") has been working on "Crude" for three years, and though he feared he was coming too late to the story, a verdict is still not in sight. Having all that time to explore the situation has paid off for Berlinger, enabling him to gain the confidence of his subjects and show us situations that ordinarily would not be open to outsiders.

For what "Crude" does best is take us behind the scenes and show in often candid detail how campaigns are waged, tactics decided on and strategies prioritized. For both sides realize that lawsuits like this one are not won or lost in the courtroom alone but in the critical realm of perception and public opinion.

"Crude" begins with a typical back-and-forth. In 2008, news clips show Pablo Fajardo, the lead attorney for the plaintiffs, and his associate, Luis Yanza, receiving the prestigious Goldman Environmental Prize. Then comes Chevron's reaction, as a representative says that the men have in effect made up the story for which they're being honored. What's going on here?

Next we see the charismatic

Fajardo back in Ecuador and visiting a tiny Amazon enclave where the residents discuss, often in an indigenous language, the progress of the lawsuit. Periodically throughout the film we visit places like this and see the pervasive health problems that have resulted from wretched stewardship of the country's oil resources.

We also spend a great deal of time with a Spanish-speaking environmental lawyer from New York named Steven Donziger, someone who specializes in class-action suits and is a key legal advisor to Fajardo. We see and hear Donziger in all kinds of privileged situations, even with Joseph Kohn, the Philadelphia attorney whose firm is bankrolling the case and hopes to profit financially if Chevron loses.

Donziger not only discusses legal strategy but works hard to get the kind of publicity that will galvanize public opinion. His courtship of the forceful Trudie Styler, the co-founder, along with her husband, Sting, of the Rainforest Foundation, is shown in detail and is a fascinating case study of real-world political action.

Chevron, not surprisingly, does not allow Berlinger into similar meetings, but through statements by their attorneys



**INDIGENOUS:** Emergildo Criollo is a leader in the Cofaán community. A lawsuit against Chevron alleges that 18 billion gallons of toxic wastewater were dumped into the Amazon.

DAVID GILBERT/First Run Features

## 'Crude'

MPAA rating: Unrated  
Running time: 1 hour and 45 minutes  
Playing: At the Landmark, West Los Angeles

and representatives, we get a clear idea of the shrewd ways the oil giant is fighting back at every turn.

The company's strategy is twofold. First is the culture of

denial. To see apparently sincere Chevron representatives flat out contradict everything the plaintiffs are claiming shows the power stonewalling has to, at the very least, create doubt in the public mind.

Because that strategy doesn't work as well in Ecuador, where the damage is visible and hard to talk away, Chevron is ready with a moving-target series of fallback positions: Nothing was done that wasn't permitted by law, the Ecuadorean government signed off on a cleanup, most of the damage was done by the

state-owned Petroecuador. Chevron also likes to claim that the only reason the suit was filed in the first place is because greedy U.S. attorneys are after the company's money.

It's true that the plaintiffs wouldn't have a prayer without American money and celebrity involvement, but does that mean their claims are any less just? It's still a David and Goliath story. What's different is that David has gotten his hands on some really choice stones.

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## From Ecuador to Rwanda: Portraits of Global Threats and Struggles

Lessons in how the world works and portraits of the never-ending struggles in places around the globe where power is challenged by populist resistance: such matters

**STEPHEN HOLDEN**

**FILM**

are a concern of the Human Rights Watch International Film Festival, which this year celebrates its 20th anniversary.

Rarely have such conflicts been examined with the depth and power of Joe Berlinger's documentary "Crude." Three years in the making, the film looks at all sides of the so-called Amazon Chernobyl case, a multibillion-dollar lawsuit that pits 30,000 Ecuadorean rainforest dwellers against Chevron.

In the film, which has its New York premiere on Saturday, the plaintiffs allege that three decades of pollution from petrochemical sludge dumped by Texaco, which merged with Chevron in 2001, have created a dead zone the size of Rhode Island and resulted in skyrocketing rates of birth defects and cancer, especially leukemia. Chevron has fought the lawsuit, claiming the case was cooked up by greedy "environmental con men" and blames the state-owned Petroecuador, which took over the country's oil production in 1990.

As much as "Crude" sympathizes with the plaintiffs (the film's hero, Pablo Fajardo, their lead lawyer, once worked in the oil fields), it isn't a starkly black-and-white David and Goliath story. We hear from scientists, lawyers for both sides, Ecuadorean judges, celebrity activists (Trudie Styler and Sting) and President Rafael Correa of Ecuador, who has sided with the plaintiffs in a case that may drag on for decades. These real characters and events play out on the screen like a sprawling legal thriller.

There is more than one way for a film to tweak the powers that be. And "The Yes Men Fix the World" goes at it with a raised eyebrow and a droll sense of humor. The festival's closing-night film, this sequel to "The Yes



JUAN DIEGO PÉREZ

Joe Berlinger's "Crude" examines a lawsuit against Chevron.

The Human Rights International Film Festival runs through June 25 at Walter Reade Theater, 165 West 65th Street, Lincoln Center; (212)875-5601, hrw.org/en/

Men" (2004) follows the screwball activists Mike Bonanno and Andy Bichlbaum, who pose as business honchos, sneak into corporate events and stage pranks that embarrass multinational companies.

Here Mr. Bichlbaum, pretending to be a Dow Chemical spokesman, declares that the company accepts responsibility for the deaths of thousands from the 1984 chemical leak at Union Carbide's factory in Bhopal, India. (Dow bought Union Carbide in 2001.)

A selection of the festival's stronger films would include "The Reckoning: The Battle for the International Criminal Court." This history of the tribunal, founded in 2002, follows the intrepid prosecutor Luis Moreno-Ocampo over three years as he tries, without police backing, to issue arrest warrants to Congolese warlords and the president of Sudan.

Barmak Akram's "Kabuli Kid" is a fictional, seriocomic portrait of an Afghan cab driver in Kabul

whose last passenger abandons her baby son in his vehicle. When the baby is rejected by an orphanage and the police, he brings the boy home to his family. The perspective widens, and "Kabuli Kid" becomes a complex examination of Afghan society.

Anne Aghion's "My Neighbor, My Killer" belongs to her decade-long documentary project chronicling the Rwandan open-air reconciliation hearings called gacacas (pronounced ga-CHA-chas), in which citizen judges preside, as confessed Hutu killers, returned from prison, confront survivors in their communities. The film focuses on Gafumba, a rural village, and it earned Ms. Aghion the festival's Nestor Almendros Award for courage in filmmaking.

## CALENDAR

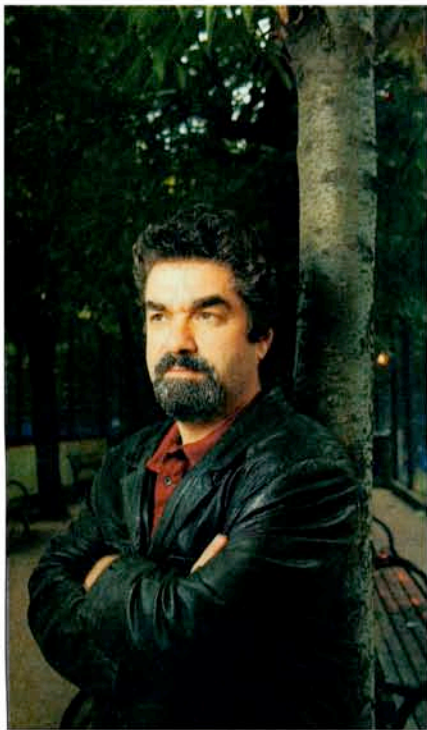
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## NONFICTION FILM

## 'Crude' tactics in Ecuador

One visit convinced director Joe Berlinger that the Amazon area had an environmental tale for him to tell.

GARY GOLDSTEIN



GABRIEL COLE/Los Angeles Times

**DOCUMENTARIAN:** Director Berlinger ("Metallica: Some Kind of Monster") shot "Crude" over three years.

For director Joe Berlinger, the painstaking road to making the powerful documentary "Crude," all started with what he dubs his "toxi-tour" of a contaminated swath of Ecuador's Amazonian rain forest. After massive oil exploration that began in the mid-1960s by Texaco (in a consortium formed with Gulf), the area — approximately the size of Rhode Island — is now home to some of the world's most heinous environmental destruction.

Four years ago, Berlinger traveled to Ecuador to view the destruction at the urging of acquaintance Steven Donziger, a Manhattan-based attorney and consultant to the legal team representing 30,000 native Ecuadorians embroiled, since 1993, in a protracted class-action lawsuit against Texaco and, later, Chevron, which acquired Texaco in 2001. The plaintiffs charge that Texaco spent three decades systematically poisoning their water, air and land, which led to widespread disease and an irrevocable breakdown of these indigenous peoples' traditional ways of life. (Though state oil company Petroecuador took over complete ownership of the consortium oil fields from Texaco in 1992, it is not involved in this now-\$27-billion lawsuit, a verdict on which is reportedly expected in early 2010.)

Berlinger's initially "reluctant" trip to the Amazon was, to say the least, an eye-opener for the director of such acclaimed documentaries as "Brother's Keeper" and "Metallica: Some Kind of Monster." Recalled the New York-based filmmaker in a recent phone interview, "I was absolutely dumbfounded; the pollution there was just unbelievable. There was literally no fresh drinking water." He added, "While Texaco was operating, they just dumped waste into the rivers and streams that's home to five indigenous tribes. The lack of moral responsibility just blew me away."

Though, at first, Berlinger was unsure his usual aesthetic criteria for undertaking a documentary ("unfolding action, a present-tense story, juicy characters") would be met here, something he witnessed on his second day in the region changed his mind. "I came upon a group of Cofán villagers preparing a meal near the river, and I noticed they were using

this big, industrial-sized can of tuna fish. I found out it was because their local fish are either very diseased or dead. That image, more than anything else, made me realize I had to answer the call and point a camera at this and figure out how to make a film to help these people."

Berlinger, who considers himself "a filmmaker first, a social activist second," didn't initially know exactly what kind of film he was making or if it would be a feature at all. It was also the first time since he co-directed 1992's "Brother's Keeper," with frequent collaborator Bruce Sinofsky, that Berlinger started working on a picture without outside funding or distribution in place.

Nonetheless, the filmmaker, who was "shocked" by the dearth of media play for what was happening there, pushed forward until, on his second trip to Ecuador, he met Amazon-born Pablo Fajardo, the charismatic, if unlikely, lead attorney for the plaintiffs, whose law school education was sponsored by the Roman Catholic Church.

"Pablo's this very simple, humble man, from these humble beginnings," Berlinger explained. "He went from being an impoverished oil field worker to the lead lawyer taking on, as his first case, the fifth-largest company in the world. All of a sudden, I said, 'Wow, I have a central character. I have a hero!'"

Around this same time, judicial inspections of the oil-related rain forest damage were being scheduled to begin after a nine-year delay, so Berlinger found the "present-tense structure" that had been eluding him. The director started shooting this evidentiary phase of the trial, which took place not in a courtroom but, more dramatically, in the jungle. "At this point, I felt, 'OK, now I can make a film,'" said Berlinger, who also co-wrote and directed the "Blair Witch Project" sequel "Book of Shadows: Blair Witch 2."

But shooting the ambitious "Crude," which occurred over the course of three years and 25 trips to Ecuador (and netted more than 600 hours of footage), was rife with obstacles, including sweltering equatorial heat, rampant health concerns and the insurgent violence that

plagues the Ecuador-Colombia border. Contended Berlinger, "It was without a doubt the hardest production situation I've encountered."

The project received a significant spotlight in May 2007 when Vanity Fair published a lengthy piece about the landmark lawsuit against Chevron, a case that became known as the "Amazon Chernobyl." The article inspired producer-environmental activist Trudie Styler to travel to the Ecuadorian Amazon to survey the pollution firsthand and to meet with the poverty-stricken locals, an alarming number of whom have skin disorders, respiratory illnesses and cancer.

The result: Styler and musician husband Sting's nonprofit Rainforest Foundation, in association with UNICEF, developed a pilot program in which a special water collection and filtration system was devised to provide clean drinking water to those living in the region's most contaminated areas.

"I have very deep admiration for Sting and Trudie," said Berlinger, who concedes that "Crude," which was set to open in L.A. on Friday, takes a "left turn" to dwell a bit on Styler and Sting after it documents Styler's challenging visit to Ecuador. The filmmaker noted, "I thought it was very important from a 'message' standpoint that we see that some tangible good can be had from that kind of uncomfortable but necessary intersection of celebrity culture and social activism."

And what's Berlinger's personal take on this complex, David-and-Goliath court case? "I believe in the theory of the lawsuit that the people who set up this system, which is an inherently polluting system of oil production, are the ones who are responsible," answered the director. "But [as a filmmaker], I'm trying to make people aware that when you fill your tank with cheap and abundant gasoline in this country, other people in another part of the globe are paying a price for it."

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# Crude

By Peter Travers

September 10, 2009

Here's a powerhouse of a documentary that makes you feel mad as hell and unwilling to take it anymore. Filmmaker Joe Berlinger (*Paradise Lost*) is calling out Chevron for despoiling the Ecuadorean rainforest (via its merger with Texaco in 2001) and using every spin in the Chevron PR book to pretend otherwise. A 1993 lawsuit pitting indigenous tribes against the oil company is still tied up in the courts. Berlinger hears both sides, with native lawyer Pablo Fajardo taking on the corporate hotshots. Vanity Fair and Sting's wife, Trudie Styler, take up the cause. But the most telling arguments come from watching tribes living in a toxic wasteland with children ravaged by skin diseases and cancer. The shattering sight of sludge creating a poison rainbow on a river argues eloquently about why oil and water don't mix.

## Joe Berlinger's Remarkable Crude

Toxic battle between big oil and dying natives in Ecuador gets vérité treatment

By Scott Foundas

Tuesday, September 8th 2009

Water, water everywhere, but not a drop to drink. Why? Because it's thick with sludge. Moving briskly through a stranger-than-fiction, serpentine narrative that is still unfolding, Joe Berlinger's remarkable documentary, *Crude*, recounts an infuriating litany of South American exploitation, backroom glad-handing, and bureaucratic dead ends that has, among other collateral damages, created a Rhode Island-size "death zone" of toxic pollution in the middle of the Ecuadorian Amazon.

For nearly 30 years, beginning in the mid-1960s, the former Texaco oil company (acquired by Chevron in 2001) drilled for oil in Ecuador, in and around the ancestral homeland of the indigenous Cofán Indian community. In 1992, Texaco finally lost its government-granted concession and was forced to cede control of its drilling sites to state-owned Petroecuador. Three years later, Texaco conducted a purported "environmental remediation" as part of a \$40 million settlement with the Ecuadorian government that, in turn, indemnified the company against any further government claims. And yet today, the soil and water of the area still run black with oil, the Cofán are dying of cancer at an alarming rate, and the buck for this enviro-disaster is being passed between Chevron and Petroecuador faster than a Bobby Hull slap shot.

A master of true-crime vérité, Berlinger previously co-directed (with longtime filmmaking partner Bruce Sinofsky) *Brother's Keeper*, centered on a fratricide trial in the dairy-farming community of Munnsville, New York, and the two *Paradise Lost* documentaries, about the ongoing travails of three Arkansas teenagers questionably convicted of murder. In the gripping, intrinsically cinematic *Crude*, he does an equally superb job of taking us through the twists and turns of the decade-and-a-half, multibillion-dollar class-action lawsuit filed by the Cofán against Chevron—a legal battle nearly as long as the Amazon itself, and with no discernible end in sight. (To wit, a September 1 *New York Times* article reports that bribery allegations raised by Chevron against the judge in the case could once again delay a judgment.) Berlinger, who arrives in Ecuador just as the evidentiary phase of the trial is about to begin, presents both sides of the case as objectively as possible, never inserting himself into the narrative, and turning the audience, in effect, into a jury. Chevron even sends its in-house environmental scientist to make its case to Berlinger, though the defensive interview that results plays like a Tilda Swinton outtake from *Michael Clayton*.

The rest of the supporting cast is a colorful assortment, from Steven Donziger, the Cofán's fiery American environmental attorney, to Pablo Fajardo, the 25-year-old former field worker who improbably finds himself as lead prosecutor in the case, to . . . Trudie Styler? Sure enough, at a key moment in *Crude*, the advocacy-minded Mrs. Sting develops a passionate interest in the plight of the Cofán, and her involvement leads directly to a flurry of increased U.S. media attention, including a splashy *Vanity Fair* profile of Fajardo. Consequently, some have deemed Berlinger's film a touch crude itself in its essentially uncritical view of this showy sort of celebrity consciousness-raising. But whatever one thinks of the beautiful people, the third-world children they adopt, and the noble causes they support, *Crude* shows how celebrities can and do make things happen in the political sphere—and how, in an age when President Obama's shirtless torso is as much a tabloid staple as Zac Efron's, resistance may be futile.

# THE HUFFINGTON POST

THE INTERNET NEWSPAPER: NEWS BLOGS VIDEO COMMUNITY

## **‘Crude’: The cost of social Darwinism**

By Marshall Fine

September 4, 2009

I would have sworn that “The Cove” had the Oscar sewn up for best documentary this year. But Joe Berlinger’s “Crude,” which opens next Wednesday (9.9.09), will be in the thick of the Oscar fight.

You’ve got to hand it to Berlinger for his even-handed work on “Crude,” a film that depicts immense sadness and stunning corporate villainy. Yet Berlinger offers a balanced look at the conflict. Chevron gets the chance to tell its story and Berlinger never pulls any sort of “gotcha” move on them. It’s just that the facts are so damning, even given the full-bore public-relations disinformation campaign by Chevron.

The story Berlinger tells is about the callously deadly and widespread despoiling of the Ecuadorian rain forest by Texaco – now owned by Chevron – and Chevron’s refusal to accept responsibility for it. It’s infuriating, at the least, to look at and listen to evidence – and listen to Chevron’s lawyers and spokespeople denying all the things they so obviously are guilty of.

But Berlinger tells the story calmly, carefully, offering both sides the opportunity to present a case. Yet it’s obvious to anyone with eyes that Chevron is being disingenuous about its culpability for massive environmental crimes. It’s just as obvious why Chevron is dead-set on tying the matter up in court until everyone involved has died of old age or the cancer caused by Chevron’s toxic legacy.

The film focuses on a lawsuit filed in 1993 in American courts on behalf of indigenous Ecuadorian tribes, charging that Texaco – now Chevron – had drilled for oil – and found it – in the Ecuadorian jungles. They took the oil – and left behind a patchwork of toxic dumps full of petrochemical sludge. They also dumped toxic wastewater into any convenient waterway – poisoning the source of clean water for tens of thousands of people.

The result has been an epidemic of cancer and virulent skin rashes among a population that has lived off the land and the river for hundreds of years. Chevron, of course, insists that there is no proof that the pervasive petrochemical pollution is connected to the oil fields and that even if proof exists, they can’t prove it’s Texaco’s fault.

Berlinger’s film picks up the trial as it moves to Ecuador – after Chevron got it moved out of American courts, in hopes of a more favorable hearing. He shows us scenes from a judicial inspection – part of the evidence-gathering segment of the trial – in which the judge, as well as the lead attorneys for each side, went into the jungle and inspected the sites. Even knee-deep in viscous sludge, the Chevron attorney employs a time-wasting defense of denial.

Fortunately for the tribes, they have one of their own – an impassioned young attorney who grew up in the oilfields named Pablo Fajardo. He’s not only smart and well-prepared, but he exudes a kind of moral strength and humility that can even withstand the celebrity flattery of Vanity Fair magazine or of Trudie (Mrs. Sting) Styler, who visits the region and adopts the cause as her own, spreading the word internationally.

You listen to the stories told by the indigenous residents – woeful accounts of not having clean water and being forced to drink and cook in poisoned water instead, of watching children waste away to cancer – and you can’t help but think: Here are people used to a subsistence living, which they took from nature. It wasn’t much but it was their life. So what can they do when some rich multinational corporation decides that profits are more important than these people’s right to live their lives unmolested?

“Crude” builds in power, a David-vs.-Goliath story that tells it like it is. It leaves you shaking your head at the naked power grab driven by social Darwinism, as well as the bravery of the men who stand up to it. It’s impossible to watch this film and not come away with a personal vow never to patronize the Chevron corporation again.



## Nothing 'Crude' About Hit Documentary

By: Roger Friedman // Thursday September 10, 2009

**Joe Berlinger's** "Crude" looked a little troublesome at Sundance this year. The political documentary about Chevron allegedly poisoning Ecuador's water with oil spills didn't get picked up right away.

But lo and behold: First Run Features made the deal, the film opened last night with a premiere downtown, and the New York Times's **A.O. Scott** was among the rave reviews. And I do mean, rave. "Crude" should be on the short list for Academy Award consideration now that the word is spreading.

What's interesting about "Crude" is that it tells two stories. One is about Chevron Oil inheriting a mess left behind by Texaco in Ecuador — and instead of cleaning it up, making it worse, then defending their position. Children have died from the tainted water, massive amounts of corruption have occurred, and a corporation is — allegedly — killing a whole country.

I say allegedly because there's a long-aborning court case filed by the people of Ecuador against Chevron. There was a preliminary suggestion of an award to the people of \$27 million. But the court doesn't have to accept that finding, so the case winds on.

The second interesting thing is that the case has gone on so long that **Pablo Fajardo** had enough time grow up in Ecuador, go to college and law school, and then bring the suit. A CNN "Hero," Fajardo was featured two years ago in Vanity Fair's Green Issue. He's a compelling central subject.

A third aspect of the film, and the case, is the presence of **Trudie Styler and Sting**, and their Rainforest Foundation. Styler is in the film, having taken an active interest in Fajardo's story and the plight of the Ecuadorians. She helped get water filtration systems down to the country — a band aid for sure, but something while the oil slicks keep coming down the river. Sting is featured from The Police's appearance at Live Earth in 2007, where Fajardo came to meet North Americans who could help him get the word out. Of course, back then he'd never heard of Sting or The Police. Now he knows the words to "Message in a Bottle."

"Crude" is as entertaining as it is jolting. Documentaries don't get long runs in theaters, so try and see it fast before it heads to DVD. It will make you think twice and three times when you see a Chevron station. Just the idea that Chevron/Texaco's oil spills are millions of gallons more than what the Exxon Valdez left behind should give pause.

# The Washington Post

## Not simply an underdog's tale

By John Anderson  
Friday, October 23, 2009

Had Michael Moore wanted to make a serious movie about capitalism, he would have made "Crude." Joe Berlinger's scorched-earth documentary and David-and-Goliath drama offers more than a few eco-outraged observations on the not-so-free enterprise system: As the film very eloquently implies, when the greater good is defined as profits, and a lack of culpability is proportionate to your number of shareholders, well . . . a lot of petroleum-soaked chickens will be coming home to roost.

For three years, Berlinger followed the now-17-year-old lawsuit against Chevron filed by 30,000 indigenous Ecuadorans, and the results are an eco-war strategy as might have been devised by Sun Tzu. Witnesses are prepped, strategies are rehearsed, judges are buttonholed and celebrities are stroked -- and this is the strategy of the "good guys," as they probably would be defined by Berlinger. While both sides in the case certainly are given their voice, it's unlikely that the director -- who enjoys a lucrative commercial career in New York -- would have been inspired to leave hearth and home by his deep sense of injustice over the sufferings of Chevron.

And yet, "Crude" is that rare thing in fiction or nonfiction cinema, a movie that relies on its audience to draw the right conclusions. Chevron makes a decent case for itself: It wasn't even in the Amazon from 1972 to 1990, when an alleged 18 billion gallons of toxic wastewater were dumped there, sickening the inhabitants (notably the plaintiff Cofán tribe). But Texaco was, and Chevron took it over in 2001. And while much blame is assigned by all parties to the government-owned PetroEcuador, which has run the country's oil production since the early '90s, all the experts brought in to make assessments conclude that the damage is deep and old.

Chevron's motives are clear -- although the pending judgment against it is "only" \$27 billion, it hardly pays to set a precedent and settle. When Pablo Fajardo, the lead attorney for the plaintiffs, and his associate Luis Yanza receive the prestigious Goldman Environmental Prize in 2008, a Chevron spokesman is heard calling them liars. Lawyers for the Ecuadorans admit that a Chevron defeat could mean big fees. When we see Chevron's agents -- such as counsel Ricardo Reis Veiga, who has since been indicted for fraud -- they admit nothing.

Berlinger ("Brother's Keeper," "Paradise Lost") lets it play out artfully. The fact that Chevron's representatives come across as soulless shills is hardly his fault; he lets them present their case without comment. It's hardly his responsibility to make someone such as corporation scientist Sara McMillan appear less reptilian when she contends that there's been no damage to the jungle, no oil-related illness, no correlation between pollution and death. From what the viewer can tell, Chevron is a little like the guy who performed a little surgery and stole your kidneys: What kidneys? Prove you ever had kidneys! If the movie is any indication, Chevron would have the public believe there was no Amazon at all -- something people might be willing to believe, were Berlinger not sticking "Crude" in their faces.



## Crude

By Elizabeth Weitzman  
September 11, 2009



Documentary about the contamination of the Ecuadoran Amazon. At the IFC (1:45). NR: disturbing images. In English and Spanish with subtitles.

One has to wonder if oil industry executives are concerned about the release of Joe Berlinger's damning documentary, or if they plan to ignore its accusations entirely. The latter seems most likely, given the corporate inhumanity Berlinger ferociously exposes.

According to a lawsuit filed by ailing and impoverished Ecuadorans, Texaco--now owned by Chevron--contaminated their land with a literally poisonous disregard. The hero of the story is a young local lawyer, and it should already be clear who the villains are. Berlinger gives Chevron representatives plenty of screen space, but their pat evasions can hardly compete with the heartbreaking scenes of an oil-drenched Amazon.

## Is Chevron scared of "Crude" the movie?

September 9, 2009

By Deborah Zabarenko, Environment Correspondent



WASHINGTON (Reuters) - Is oil giant Chevron afraid of a movie?

One of the stars of "Crude," a documentary about a \$27 billion environmental lawsuit filed against the company on behalf of residents of Ecuador's Amazon, certainly thinks so. A spokesman for Chevron vehemently denies it.

The film's New York opening on Wednesday is the latest twist in a class action case that began 16 years ago, which argues that Chevron should compensate some 30,000 Ecuadoreans who live near waste pits left by oil exploration going back to the 1960s.

"Crude" shows villagers living by oil-slicked streams, washing clothes in contaminated water. One scene shows a newborn with head-to-toe skin rashes; others offer interviews with Ecuadoreans who contend those who use the water or live near it are prone to cancer, birth defects and other ailments.

The film is absorbing, in large part due to one of the personalities with the most screen time: Trudie Styler, who with her husband Sting founded the Rainforest Foundation.

Styler visited the affected area in Ecuador and her group donated rain-collection barrels so villagers can have clean water. She praised the film for its environmental message and vividly recalled the stench in the area.

"Before you're smelling things, your eyes start to prick and to have a burning sensation and the closer you get to ... these contaminated areas where people are being forced to live, your nostrils fill up ... your saliva gets the taste of petroleum in it as well ... and then 20 minutes later you're getting this horrible headache," Styler told Reuters.

### CHEVRON DENIES RESPONSIBILITY

Chevron denies responsibility for the contamination and stepped up a media campaign last week, offering videotapes that the company said show the Ecuadorean judge in the case was involved in a bribery scheme.

The judge recused himself from the case but said he did nothing wrong, and the Washington D.C.-based Amazon Defense Coalition that supports the plaintiffs said the video shows the judge resisted attempts to bribe him.

Steve Donziger, a U.S.-based consulting plaintiffs' attorney, questioned the timing of Chevron's latest campaign.

"I think the timing of the release of these videotapes -- which they've had, by their own admission, for months -- is directly related to the release of a film that they're scared about and they're hoping people don't go see," Donziger said in a telephone interview.

Kent Robertson, a spokesman for Chevron based in San Ramon, California, said the video was released last week because the company needed time to authenticate it, not because of the film's opening.

"The film is long on emotion and short on facts," Robertson said by telephone.

He said there was no documented proof of a link between oil-related pollution in the Ecuadorean jungle and diseases suffered by the plaintiffs and said rulings by the judge who recused himself should be annulled.

As for the petroleum Styler described in the area, Robertson said, "If you're seeing fresh oil today ... how can that be the responsibility of a company that stopped operating in 1990?"

The plaintiffs allege that Texaco, bought by Chevron in 2001, dumped billions of gallons (liters) of polluted water in the jungle for more than two decades before the company left Ecuador in the early 1990s.



## Crude (2009)

By Owen Gleiberman

*Crude*, Joe Berlinger's new documentary, takes an unsparing look at the kind of corporate policy that leads to environmental calamity. In 1993, 30,000 residents of the Amazonian rain forests of Ecuador filed a class-action suit against Texaco. The suit, inherited by Chevron after a 2001 merger, alleged that decades of ruthless oil drilling had poisoned the ancestral territory of the Cofán nation, rendering the region uninhabitable and causing an epidemic of cancer. Berlinger charts the thorny years of litigation led by two heroic lawyers. It's a David-and-Goliath tale, full of anger and disturbing accusation, but it's also inspiring. B+

October 8, 2009

SPONSORS  
(Ads will not print)

## Crude

By Liam Lacey  
From Friday's Globe and Mail

### *David and Goliath in the rain forest*

#### **Crude**

- Directed by Joe Berlinger
- With Pablo Fajardo, Steven Donziger and Trudy Styler
- Classification: NA

Environmental documentaries in the last decade have had the predictability of an evangelical sermon or a going-out-of-business sale: The end is nigh, but act now and the bounty can still be yours. *Crude* is something else. A legal thriller, it's a three-year investigation into the disaster environmentalists call the "Amazonian Chernobyl" that offers both sides of the story and leaves the viewer in the position of jury.

The plaintiffs in the case are roughly 30,000 Ecuadoreans living in the Amazonian rain forest who claim that oil company Texaco (subsequently Chevron) dumped 18 billion gallons of toxic wastewater into the forest from the 1960s to the 1990s. Their class-action suit is for \$27-billion (U.S.).

What makes *Crude* worthy of the overused term "epic" is the way the case symbolizes a host of contemporary issues: the iron-fistedness of multinational corporations; environmental despoliation; the disappearance of indigenous cultures; and the power of celebrity and the media to influence justice.

Director Joe Berlinger - who created such memorably intimate documentaries as the dairy-farm fratricidal tale *Brother's Keeper* as well as *Paradise Lost: The Child Murders at Robin Hood Hills* and *Metallica: Some Kind of Monster* - paints on a broad canvas here. He joins the trial midway and fills in the picture. We see oil-soaked earth and cancer-stricken families, babies with sores on their bodies. We also meet a collection of vivid characters, including the Ecuadorean oil-field labourer turned lawyer Pablo Fajardo and his voluble Upper West Side adviser, Steven Donziger.

*Crude* runs at the Bloor Cinema, 506 Bloor St. W., Toronto, Oct. 9 to Oct. 15 (416-516-2330).

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## Crude

Year Released: 2009

Directed By: Joe Berlinger

(NR, 105 min.)

by Marjorie Baumgarten

10/9/2009

Professional documentarian Berlinger (*Brother's Keeper*, *Paradise Lost*) fashions a compelling story from a daunting thicket of material that surrounds the epic environmental lawsuit filed in U.S. courts by 30,000 Ecuadorans against the oil company Texaco. In 2001, Texaco merged with Chevron, and therefore inherited the conflict. At this point in 2009, the class-action suit has been in play for more than 15 years, with at least another 10 years of disputation more than likely. At stake is the health of the Ecuadorean Amazon and the indigenous peoples whose lives and livelihoods are dependent on the river for sustenance. Texaco (now Chevron) came to Ecuador in the late 1960s to drill for oil, and by the time the company left in the early 1990s, it is said the company left behind poisonous oil slicks that have done at least 30 times more damage than the Exxon Valdez disaster and pumped toxic contamination into the rivers and rain forest, which has created massive cancer clusters throughout the region. Berlinger manages to corral various strands of information that spread over a couple of continents and even more languages and shape a strong narrative thread that keeps the story from getting bogged down in either legalese or overwhelmingly populist sentiment. Along the way, the film highlights the entrenched pattern of corporate America's bulldozing of indigenous interests at home and abroad and something of a colonialist tradition of Manifest Destiny. At the heart of the story is American Steven Donziger, the class-action suit's lead attorney, who provides ongoing background for much of what we see. However, also intrinsic to the tale is Ecuadoran attorney Pablo Fajardo, whose life story and personal growth are part of what we witness. Some Chevron spokespeople are additionally included among the voices heard in *Crude*, as is ubiquitous philanthropist Trudie Styler, who, along with her husband, Sting, takes up the Ecuadorans' cause. *Crude's* moving testimony and careful documentation make it hard to turn away from this issue. It will certainly remain in your mind the next time you stop for gas. (For an interview with director Joe Berlinger, see "Ecuador v. Big Oil," April 17.)

# The Washington Post

## Big oil stains the Amazon in the documentary film 'Crude'

By Steven Mufson  
Thursday, October 22, 2009

For the indigenous people of Ecuador's blemished Amazon, it doesn't matter whether Chevron is to blame, or Texaco, or the state-owned company Petroecuador. All that matters is that the kids have rashes, the chickens are dying, the people have cancer and the earth around many of their villages is soaked with oil.

And that, in the end, is what persuaded documentary maker Joe Berlinger to take on the complex battle now playing out in an Ecuadoran court. After returning from a trip to the Amazon he took a drink of clean, clear tap water at his suburban New York home in Westchester County and realized he had to make a movie. The result is "Crude," which opens Friday at Landmark's E Street Cinema.

What sets Berlinger's documentary apart from other depictions of what environmentalists call "the Amazon's Chernobyl" is that it is a film about advocacy as well as crude oil. Taking advantage of access to a savvy New York lawyer and an earnest Ecuadoran representing the indigenous people, Berlinger shows how they package an argument not only for Ecuador's court, but for the court of public opinion.

Whether that is heroic or insidious depends on your point of view, but Berlinger doesn't have to decide. His sympathies lie with the victims. In the end, his story leaves viewers with images of an ecological catastrophe that continues even as the 16-year-old legal case drags on.

### Toxic waste lawsuit

The case hinges on the question of who bears responsibility for the dumping of toxic-waste products from oil drilling in Ecuador's remote rainforest region, where drilling started in the 1960s. Back then it was promoted by Ecuador's government, which later joined OPEC, and featured proudly in an old Texaco ad shown in "Crude." It boasts of bringing "muscle and machines to a territory untouched by civilization." At the time that was widely viewed as a good thing.

On one side of the lawsuit are tens of thousands of indigenous people, represented by an appealing Ecuadoran, Pablo Fajardo, and the American Steven Donziger, who says he has moral as well as financial interests in the case. On the other side is the giant Chevron, which inherited this mess when it bought Texaco in 2001 even though Texaco had sold off its interests to the Ecuadoran state oil company years earlier.

Each side has cranked out reams of supporting data for energy reporters (like me), and they have traded accusations about manipulating the court in Ecuador. The film shows the two sides face to face in court sessions held in the Amazon region, where a judge examines firsthand the evidence of environmental damage and where a court-appointed investigator later goes to collect core samples. These samples drawn from beneath the Earth's surface come up soaked in oil.

The subject is new to Berlinger. His past films include "Metallica: Some Kind of Monster," about the explosive tensions in the heavy metal group; "Paradise Lost," about convictions in the murder of three 8-year-old boys; and "Brother's Keeper," also about a murder trial. As with his earlier films, Berlinger lets the characters speak for themselves without narration.

Donziger is the film's most compelling character. He is shown in a U.S. hotel room coaching an Amazon tribesman about how to tell his story to an American audience. He persuades Vanity Fair to do an admiring article about Fajardo, the Ecuadoran lawyer. He attends the inauguration of Ecuador's new leftist president, Rafael Correa, who later takes a helicopter trip to the damaged jungle.

Donziger also goes to London to enlist the support of Sting's wife, Trudie Styler, a founding patron of the Rainforest Foundation. When she visits the jungle later, Donziger takes her aside to encourage her to mention Texaco as often as possible in public statements.

## **Chevron's defense**

Chevron, by contrast, did not give Berlinger access to its strategy sessions. Late in the filming, it provided one of its U.S. lawyers and its chief environmental scientist, and Berlinger gives them a fair amount of time to make their case.

Chevron's defense

Chevron has two lines of defense. First, the company asserts that its tests show that water quality meets U.S. Environmental Protection Agency standards. It blames the recent skin rashes on poor sanitation and fecal matter in the water. Second, it says that it fulfilled its cleanup obligations when Texaco pulled out in.

At the time, Texaco spent \$40 million cleaning up and Petroecuador agreed to take responsibility for any further cleanup costs. In the 15 years since then, Petroecuador has done quite a bit of ecological damage itself. The film does not, however, press Ecuadoran officials or Petroecuador executives about their performance.

What the film also doesn't show is just how galling the entire affair must be for Chevron, which has long prided itself on being more ecologically correct, open and savvy than its colleagues at companies such as Texaco.

For the past couple of years, Chevron has been polishing its corporate image with a series of ads about the power of "human energy." One talks about "new frontiers" of energy exploration. "Where is it? How do we find it? . . . We're trying to answer those questions in ways once unimaginable. Cleaner ways. Smarter ways."

"Crude" casts a shadow on all of that.

So is Chevron liable for most of the \$27 billion in damages one Ecuadoran expert says have been caused by oil development?

Berlinger says that even now he doesn't feel qualified to judge. But, he says, "at the end of the day, we should all care more about how companies act in our name and the things that they do even if they're perfectly legal."

# the Stranger

## **Amazon Chernobyl**

*Law & Order* Meets Life and Death in Joe Berlinger's *Crude*

by David Schmader

### *Crude*

dir. Joe Berlinger

Joe Berlinger made his name with a series of documentaries that chronicled twisty legal proceedings with rare depth and artistry. In 1992's *Brother's Keeper*, Berlinger and codirector Bruce Sinofsky charted the saga of the Ward brothers, a quartet of elderly siblings in rural New York for whom a seemingly natural death spins into a mind-bendingly salacious murder trial. For 1996's *Paradise Lost*, Berlinger and Sinofsky found an even twistier case: the child murders at Robin Hood Hills, in which a trio of mopey Arkansas teens were convicted of killing three young boys. The documentary uncovered enough complicating evidence about the convictions (and the possible identity of the actual killer) to fuel a follow-up—2000's *Paradise Lost 2: Revelations*—and spark a vast and passionate movement to "Free the West Memphis Three." In all three films, criminal-justice plotlines are buffered by small, revelatory scenes of "normal life" that expand Berlinger and Sinofsky's nonfiction legal thrillers into deep, rich portraits of a time, place, and people.

In *Crude: The Real Price of Oil*, Berlinger flies solo into territory that's of a piece with his and Sinofsky's collaborations: the intricate legal battle behind one of the biggest, messiest environmental lawsuits in history. On one side: the 30,000 residents of the Amazon jungle of Ecuador, who claim that three decades of criminal irresponsibility by U.S. oil giant Texaco has so polluted the air, land, and water that the residents' very existence is in peril. On the other side: Texaco, which denies all claims of wrongdoing and is ready to spend unlimited millions to make sure the case never sees a courtroom.

Despite Texaco's strenuous efforts, the case finally gets its day in court, and that's when *Crude* springs to life: slogging through the jungle with judges and attorneys out to see the alleged evidence with their own eyes, jetting around the globe with the indigenous spokesman of the "Amazon Chernobyl," out to put a human face on this daunting wad of environmental finger-pointing and international bureaucracy.

In lesser hands, *Crude* would have made a dandy bit of preaching-to-the-choir advocacy porn. But Berlinger devotes himself to his usual task: getting as much messy truth as possible up on the screen. Texaco's talking heads get equivalent screen time with the plaintiffs' U.S. legal team and cancer-packed families. The result is an international legal thriller that will quietly blow your mind.



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Showing: Crude showtimes monday, october 5

## Crude

Add your review

Ace documentary maker Joe Berlinger (*Paradise Lost*, *Metallica: Some Kind of Monster*) anatomizes an ongoing, multibillion-dollar class-action lawsuit pitting 30,000 rural Ecuadorians against the Chevron Corporation, which has allegedly been dumping toxic waste into their sustaining length of the Amazon River. Eco-docs are bummers almost by definition, but here Berlinger's superb explanatory skills compensate for any tax on the viewer's conscience; what might have been a rote exercise in green sentimentality becomes a gripping, multifaceted thriller about media politics, global economics, and legal infighting. Wherever your sympathies fall, this may teach you a lot about the way the modern world works. 105 min.

by Cliff Doerksen

Official Site: [www.crudethemovie.com](http://www.crudethemovie.com)

Director: Joe Berlinger

Producer: Joe Berlinger

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## Loop

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## **Box Office: “Crude,” “Impact” Debut Nicely; “Basterds” Weinsteins’ First \$100 Million Movie**

by Peter Knegt (September 13, 2009)

Joe Berlinger’s doc “Crude” led a batch of newcomers at the specialty box office this weekend, according to estimates provided by Rentrak earlier this afternoon. The film - which tells the story of lawsuit against Chevron over contamination of the Ecuadorean Amazon - grossed \$16,729 on a sole screen at New York’s IFC Center. Since opening on Wednesday, the film has taken in \$21,967. This comes amidst controversy in which Chevron attempted to discredit the movie as “long on emotion, and short on facts.” “Crude” expands to Los Angeles on September 18th, which over 30 more markets scheduled to follow.

Also opening nicely this weekend was another environmentally conscious doc - Laura Gabbert and Justin Schein’s “No Impact Man.” Released through Oscilloscope, the film - which follows the Manhattan-based Beavan family as they abandon their high consumption 5th Avenue lifestyle and try to live a year while making no net environmental impact - grossed an estimated \$17,000 from two screens. Its showing at the Angelika in New York - where the Beavans did a Q&A - did particularly well, grossing \$13,000.

Other openers included Richard Eyre’s “The Other Man,” which stars Liam Neeson and Laura Linney, and debuted at the 2008 Toronto International Film Festival. On eight screens, “Man” grossed a mild \$56,605, averaging \$7,076. It narrowly beat the opening per-theater-average of Dave Boyle’s “White on Rice” (though considering the star power of “Man,” the two are incomparable). “Rice,” starring Hiroshi Watanabe as a 40-year old man who lives at his sister’s house, grossed \$10,200 on two screens, averaging \$5,1000 for Variance Films.

Focus Features opened its second major animated film of 2009 (after February’s hugely successful “Coraline”) in Shane Acker’s “9.” On 1,661 screens, the film opened on Wednesday (or 9/9/09) and has since grossed a decent \$15,264,000. \$10,856,000 of that came from the weekend, where “9” averaged \$6,536. Though certainly not “Coraline”-sized numbers, it’s my no means a disappointment considering both its modest budget, and the marketing challenged nature of its dark, post-apocalyptic premise. It stands as the fourth biggest opening for a PG-13 rated animated film (behind “The Simpsons Movie,” “Beavis and Butthead Do America,” and “Final Fantasy”).

Among holdovers, R.J. Cutler’s Anna Wintour doc “The September Issue” made an ambitious leap in its screen account, expanding out of the New York area and into 111 screens. The move found promising numbers, grossing \$730,000 (a number that only a handful of 2009 docs have surpassed in their total grosses). The Roadside Attractions release only saw its average drop from \$7,303 to \$6,577.

“We’re very happy with our expansion,” Roadside Attractions’ Howard Cohen told indieWIRE. “The film shows strength in lots of markets and in both urban and suburban situations. Our Manhattan grosses actually went up from last weekend, a nice sign.”

“The September Issue”’s total now stands at \$1,283,000 - already making it one of the 100 highest grossing documentaries of all time.

Finally, another film passed a significant milestone this weekend. Quentin Tarantino’s hugely successful “Inglourious Basterds” grossed \$6,546,000 in its fourth weekend - taking its total to \$104,309,000. That makes it distributor Weinstein Company’s very first \$100 million grosser, and Tarantino’s first since 1994’s “Pulp Fiction.” “Fiction” grossed \$107,928,762 - a number “Basterds” should surpass sometime this week.

## Film Review: Crude

By Chuleenan Svetvilas | Tue September 8, 2009 2:24 PM PST

In this fascinating follow-up to his 2004 rockumentary, *Metallica: Some Kind of Monster*, director Joe Berlinger captures a dramatic legal showdown in the Amazon rainforest. Berlinger spent three years following a marathon multibillion-dollar class-action lawsuit in which thousands of indigenous Ecuadorians are suing Chevron for polluting their water and land, causing a wave of sickness and death. (The suit, now in its 16th year, was originally filed against Texaco, which Chevron acquired in 2001.) "Water is the life blood of the Cofán people," explains an indigenous leader. "They came and spilled oil, contaminated the river, and my children died."

Yet *Crude* isn't your standard David vs. Goliath environmental film. It takes a sweeping approach, weaving together stories of the indigenous people and the lawyers fighting on their behalf, particularly a charismatic young Ecuadorian named Pablo Fajardo. The film's most riveting legal moments take place in the rainforest itself, where lawyers make passionate open-air arguments during an inspection of alleged contamination sites. "When I say something, they have to think a thousand times to come up with a lie to counter my truth," Fajardo says of the oil company's lawyers. "They have to think much harder than me."

Even as he takes pains to show how oil drilling has ravaged the lives of the rainforest dwellers, Berlinger lets Chevron tell its side of the story. The oil giant blames Ecuador's state oil company, which briefly ran the oil fields in the '90s, yet also claims there is no evidence of any health effects. Its lawyers suggest that their scrappy opposing counsel just wants a piece of the potential payoff. Recognizing the complexity of the case, Berlinger doesn't take sides, but *Crude* leaves no doubt that oil and justice don't mix.



## Crude - Movie Review – 2009

The Case Against Chevron

About.com Rating Five out of Five

By Jennifer Merin, About.com

The Texaco/Chevron contamination of the Ecuadorian Amazon, dubbed the Amazon Chernobyl, is a much larger although lesser known calamity than that of the Exxon Valdez. Toxic chemicals have turned thousands of square miles of rain forest into a wasteland where nothing will grow, and several tribes of indigenous people have been brought close to extinction, along with the regions unique flora and fauna. Joe Berlinger's film exposes the extent of the damage and follows the 27-billion dollar law suit that the local people and international environmental and humanitarian groups have brought against Chevron.

### Synopsis

After the film opens with a brilliant graphic showing a map of the Ecuadorian Amazon gradually obliterated by black blotches resembling pools of oil, a Cofan woman appears on screen. She sings about how her tribe being obliterated by pollution. Thus the skillful telling of this David vs. Goliath story begins.

We follow the young Ecuadorian lawyer, Pablo Fajardo, who represents the Cofan and other local tribes in their class action against Chevron, and the American attorney who's spearheaded the 27-billion dollar suit. We listen to Chevron's attorneys and scientists denying the multinational's responsibility, and suggesting that the case is a scam put forth by those who would profit from the misfortunes of poor rural peoples.

While the debate rages, we witness the rain forest through verite footage that shows toddlers bathing in a river covered with oil slick, infants with deformities and rashes, local fishermen having to eat imported canned tuna, ducks suffering torturous spasms as they lay dying on the river banks, white cranes covered with thick-as-glue black oil, corroded pipes oozing glop into the earth.

The startling footage, shot during the thirteenth year of that ongoing law suit, is intercut with interviews with politicians, scientists, environmentalists and human rights advocates, including Amazon Watch representatives, Trudi Styler and Sting, who take up the cause of the plaintiffs. The result is a compelling, dramatic and very moving presentation of an extremely important environmental and human rights story that impacts not just the rain forest, but the wide world.

### Theme and Intent

The film clearly asserts that there's an urgent need for remediation of the thousands of square miles of rain forest that have been contaminated due to petroleum extraction initiated in the region by Chevron/Texaco in 1959. The environmental clean up is necessary for sustaining our planet, and is therefore of universal concern.

Additionally, we see that local tribes, with their unique traditions, knowledge and languages, are being wiped out because of the contamination of their homelands. In fact, one tribe that originally agreed to participate in the law suit has already become extinct. Despite its importance and magnitude, this situation and the law suit have been kept in relative obscurity in the media. This documentary focuses the international spotlight on the 'Amazon Chernobyl' and the law suit and other efforts being made to make things right.

### **Cast of Characters**

*Crude* has a real life hero in Pablo Fajardo, the Ecuadorian lawyer who took over this major case just three years after becoming a member of the bar. Fajardo, who hails from rural Ecuador, is an articulate, dedicated, brilliant and modest man. And, amazingly, he'd never even heard of socially conscious celebrities Trudi Styler and Sting before they volunteered to support the plaintiff's cause. Although they're given equal time and opportunity to make their case, the lawyers and others representing Chevron seem phoney, superficial and self-serving in contrast to Fajardo, his colleagues and the local people who are suffering from the pollution and are the plaintiffs in the case.

### **Cinematic Style**

Joe Berlinger is famous for his cinema verite approach to making documentaries. *Crude* fits that overall style, but this film seems to inch towards advocacy. It's not that Berlinger enters the scenario at any time or that he doesn't present both sides of the case, but by framing the issues with such extremely strong images of pollution and its adverse effects on tribal people and the environment, Berlinger winds up making a very strong 'see it for yourself' statement in favor of the plaintiffs.

*Crude* is a beautifully crafted documentary. The cinematography and editing are superb, and graphics -- like that opening map -- are used smartly and always appropriately. The soundtrack, which combines traditional tribal music with the contemporary sounds of Sting and an original score by Wendy Blackstone, strongly supports the images and underscores the issues.

### **Bottom Line**

*Crude* is an important, heart-wrenching, alarming and brilliantly crafted cinema verite documentary that creates public awareness about an under-reported environmental disaster caused by Chevron/Texaco's oil extraction in the Ecuadorian Amazon, and the ongoing litigation in which indigenous peoples whose homelands and health have been desecrated are seeking justice.



## Eco-doc captures 'Crude' behavior in the Amazon

By Mike Scott, The Times-Picayune

September 25, 2009

On paper, it wouldn't be hard to mistake "Crude" for a John Grisham story. It's got all the hallmarks -- sharp lawyers, raw greed, Big Business behaving badly.

The difference is that this David-vs.-Goliath story is no work of fiction. Part eco-doc, part legal-doc, it is a troubling, real story -- and a well-told one at that -- that is inspiring and infuriating all at once.

The movie, which debuted at the Sundance Film Festival in January, is built around a class-action lawsuit potentially worth \$27 billion (that's "billion," with a "b") filed against Texaco/Chevron on behalf of 30,000 indigenous Ecuadoreans. The suit claims that the oil giant exploited the South American country's natural resources, spoiling the formerly pristine Amazon landscape in the process, and then bolted without doing proper cleanup.

Now, decades later, native people are dying of cancer and other ailments at an alarming rate.

Snapshot: A David-and-Goliath documentary about an Ecuadorean lawyer's battle with oil giant Chevron over what has been dubbed by activists as the "Amazon Chernobyl."

What works: It's an absorbing film, an inspiring and infuriating peek inside a high-stakes war room.

What doesn't: Don't expect much balance -- director Joe Berlinger doesn't hide which side he's on.

Featuring: Pablo Fajardo, Steven Donziger. Director: Berlinger. Running time: 1 hour 40 minutes. Rating: Unrated. Where: Zeitgeist Multi-Disciplinary Arts Center.

Chevron denies any responsibility, but the little-man hero of "Crude" -- Ecuadorean lawyer Pablo Fajardo, who was born into poverty and clawed his way through law school -- sees things differently. Unintimidated and undeterrable, he has enlisted the help of U.S. lawyers in his fight to hold Chevron accountable.

He also affords "Crude" director Joe Berlinger a remarkable amount of access to his equally remarkable legal journey, giving the filmmaker run of his high-stakes war room.

Chevron lawyers, understandably, are considerably more guarded. They talk to Berlinger for his film, but it's mostly in sterile interviews featuring corner-office-types, spouting predictably stilted corporate-ese. That lack of candor doesn't help their argument in Berlinger's film.

It doesn't matter. Berlinger doesn't hide which side he's on -- he's with the little guy. No surprise there. After all, how many eco-docs can you name that have adopted the pro-business angle?

Just as you shouldn't expect much journalistic balance, don't expect much resolution, either. The so-called "Amazon Chernobyl" suit has been going on for 16 years. With Chevron apparently employing the tried-and-true big-business practice of stretching a suit out as long as possible to exhaust the bank account of one's opponent, it could go on for another decade before any kind of judgment is rendered (assuming a settlement isn't reached).

Regardless, Fajardo's story remains an inspiring one, and Berlinger does a solid job of capturing it.

The big question, though, is what should outrage audiences more? That an indigenous culture is in danger of being wiped off the face of the Earth by corporate greed -- or that we've heard all of this before, just with different corporate Goliaths trying to get away with trampling other Davids?

# The Seattle Times

## **Oil and Amazon rain forest don't mix**

By John Hartl  
Special to The Seattle Times

A long-running lawsuit against Chevron claims that the company (which merged with Texaco in 2001) has done \$27 billion worth of damage in the Amazon rain forest.

According to Chevron/Texaco representatives, the pollution is the result of poor sewage treatment. The corporation also argues that con men and trial lawyers have attempted to whip up a controversy for their own benefit.

Which authorities do you believe? Director Joe Berlinger, who created such provocative documentaries as "Brother's Keeper" and "Paradise Lost," lets both sides have their say in his absorbing nonfiction legal thriller "Crude."

Charismatic environmental activists make their case with claims that cancer led to premature deaths. Stiffer and less charismatic, the spokespeople for Chevron/Texaco argue that their company brought no more pollution to the forest than was already there.

Gradually the natives gain ground. Their first big break is a Vanity Fair article that calls attention to their leader, Pablo Farjardo, glamorously crowned "Jungle Man." Then the rock star, Sting, takes up their cause.

If you ever had doubts about the impact that celebrities can have on such a David-and-Goliath struggle, Berlinger methodically removes them. He also suggests how much has changed in the lives of South American villagers who still regard helicopters and other technology as Godlike phenomena.

Especially compelling are the close-ups of oil-soaked ground and the emotional testimony of a villager who lost two children to polluted river water.

The case, nicknamed "Amazon Chernobyl," continues without a resolution.

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Posted on Fri, Oct. 9, 2009

## A David and Goliath story of an oil giant's role in Ecuador



By Steven Rea

Inquirer Movie Columnist and Critic

You're an Ecuadoran Indian. You live in the rainforest. The Amazon provides the water that you drink, that you use to live. And then a big oil company rumbles in, drills into the earth, and starts pumping. Waste and pollutants seep into the ground. Oil gets into the water table, is diverted into dumping beds, or is piped to the river - for decades.

Nothing - not your village, your family, your health - will be the same again.

In the powerful and powerfully upsetting documentary *Crude*, filmmaker Joe Berlinger (*Brother's Keeper*, *Paradise Lost*, *Metallica: Some Mind of Monster*), tracks the devastating effects - high incidence of cancer, high infant-mortality rates, sick animals - that, say the 30,000 Ecuadoran plaintiffs in a class-action suit, have befallen them because of the environmental negligence of Chevron, the world's fifth-largest corporation.

With a cast of characters that includes Pablo Fajardo, a smiling yet deadly earnest Ecuadoran attorney; Steven Donziger, a Spanish-speaking New York lawyer; Joseph Kohn, the Philadelphia litigator whose firm is funding the case for the plaintiffs; celebrity eco-activists Trudie Styler and her husband, Sting; and lawyers and scientists for Chevron, *Crude* chronicles the complicated and contentious legal, political, and corporate maneuvering that has taken place in Ecuador and the United States. The alleged dumping went on between 1972 and 1990. The lawsuit was filed in 1992. A resolution is at least 10 years away, experts say.

This David and Goliath story has its good guys and its bad guys, certainly. And like any piece of advocacy journalism, it's not hard to figure out who the filmmaker's heroes are. What's less clear, and more maddening, is how several generations of Ecuadorans have been left to live on toxic land, their health and livelihoods compromised, while lawyers file motions and counter-motions and blame is passed around.

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Contact movie critic Steven Rea at 215-854-5629 or [srea@phillynews.com](mailto:srea@phillynews.com). Read his blog, "On Movies Online," at <http://go.philly.com/onmovies>.

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# Crude

By DENNIS HARVEY

A Red Envelope Entertainment presentation of an Entendre Films production, in association with @radical.media and Third Eye Motion Picture Co. Produced by Joe Berlinger, Michael Bonfiglio, J.R. DeLeon, Richard Stratton. Executive producers, Liesl Copland, Jon Kamen. Co-producers, Daniel Luciano, Danielle Pelland, Stuart Zweibel. Directed by Joe Berlinger.

With: Pablo Fajardo, Luis Yanza, Steven Donziger, Joseph Kohn, Alejandro Ponce, Adolfo Callejas, Diego Larrea, German Yanez, Richard Cabrera, Ricardo Reis Veiga, Sara McMillan Emergildo Criollo, Atossa Soltani, Maria Garofalo, Silvia Yanez, Rosa Moreno, Rafael Correa, Trudie Styler.

Breaking from the intimate nonfiction dramas of his prior features ("Brother's Keeper," "Paradise Lost," "Metallica: Some Kind of Monster"), Joe Berlinger's latest docu is an issue-oriented activist effort about corporate malfeasance and environmental catastrophe. Charting still-unresolved efforts by Ecuadorian tribes to get recompense from oil companies for pollution that has destroyed their land, culture and lives over recent decades, the pic makes an engrossing case for justice. Filmmaker's rep should give this a leg up to limited theatrical release, with wider broadcast exposure to follow.

Some 30,000 surviving tribespeople are plaintiffs in a seemingly never-ending lawsuit against Chevron, which in 2001 merged with Texaco. Latter built drilling/waste-dumping systems decades ago that many argue permanently poisoned the region's Amazonian water, air and soil, leading to sky-high cancer deaths and other woes. Chevron's argument -- voiced by spokespersons and lawyers who come off as shills here -- is that any blame should be placed on the state-owned biz that took over Ecuador's oil production several years ago. Evidence is damning, however. Colorful personalities on both sides, incriminating new/archival footage, slick assembly and Berlinger's narrative smarts make this unusually involving edutainment.