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LAST CALL AT THE OASIS

CLASSROOM GUIDE

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INTRODUCTION

This study guide is intended to flexibly support educators in preparing for and following up a class screening of **Last Call at the Oasis**, a feature documentary about the dire state of the U.S. and global water supply. Support materials are intended to facilitate group discussion, individual and collaborative creative exercise, subject-based learning and access to resources for further investigation of material. Educators are encouraged to adapt and abridge the content as necessary to meet their unique learning objectives and circumstances.

All SFFS Youth Education materials are developed in alignment with California educational standards for media literacy. SFFS Youth Education welcomes feedback and questions on all printed study materials.

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USING THIS GUIDE

Group screening of **Last Call at the Oasis** can be a useful tool for inspiring group discussion and prompting further research on a wide range of topical issues. This study guide may be used flexibly within

a classroom environment to guide these discussions, inspire follow-up activities and to generally supplement the educational value of the viewing experience. Content is selected to challenge middle and high school students to think critically about the media at hand and to facilitate further research into (and engagement with) water conservation and related issues.

ABOUT THE FILM

Firmly establishing the urgency of the global water crisis as the central issue facing our world this century, **Last Call at the Oasis** illuminates the vital role water plays in our lives, exposes the defects in the current systems and reveals communities already struggling with its ill-effects. Featuring activist Erin Brockovich, respected water experts Peter Gleick, Jay Famiglietti and Robert Glennon and social entrepreneurs experimenting with and championing revolutionary solutions, the film posits that we can manage this problem if we are willing to act now. As the United States has by far the largest “water footprint” of any nation on Earth, our collective need to conserve water, recycle resources and minimize waste has never been more urgent.

Directed by Jessica Yu (USA 2011)
105 min, Color, in English
Recommended for ages 12 and up

Recommended Subject Areas:

Arts/Media Literacy
Home Economics
School/Campus Enrichment
Science (Geology, Biology, Environmental Studies)
Social Studies (Government, Economy, Civics, Current Events)
U.S. History/Geography

Key concepts / buzzwords:

Aquifer	Pollution / Pollutants
Desalination	Population
Documentary	Reservoir
Drought/Desertification	Resource Management
Globalization	Sewage
Great Lakes	Water Conservation
“hard water”	“The Water Cycle”
Hoover Dam	“water footprint”
Irrigation	Water Recycling



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS & POST-VIEWING ACTIVITIES

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

STORY & CHARACTERS

1. Which of the interviewees did you like the best? The least? Why?
2. What did you think of the character of Erin Brockovich? How would you describe her personality? How would you describe her career? How did she compare to Julia Roberts' 2000 portrayal in the Hollywood film?
3. How would you describe the "plot" of this movie? In what order does it present its message? In your opinion, did the information progress organically? Into which pertinent locations (in the U.S. and Australia)

WHAT PHYSICAL
IMPLEMENTATIONS WOULD
IMPROVE WATER
EFFICIENCY IN YOUR HOME
OR ON YOUR CAMPUS?

does this film delve? Do you think these locations and their dire water situations provide an adequate cross-section of water issues to say that this film deals with the global crisis? What other areas of the world are experiencing problems with water supply? Are there areas of the world in which a water crisis is not inevitable?

4. What was the most memorable moment in this movie for you? The scariest? The most thought-provoking?

CONTEXT

1. What did you know or believe about the global water supply before seeing this film? What did you learn from watching it? What was the single most surprising fact you learned?
 - a. What did you learn about U.S. fresh water resources (eg. Hoover Dam, Great Lakes, Rio Grande)?
 - b. What did you learn about water pollution?
 - c. What did you learn about bottled water?
 - d. What did you learn about sewage water?
 - e. What did you learn about desalination?
2. What are some possible solutions to the global water crisis that the film presents? Will conservation alone suffice? What technological innovations have (and have not) proven to work? What are the obstacles to implementing technological innovations on a large scale? What are the obstacles to maximizing global conservation efforts?
3. How do you think the global water system will look in 10 years? In 50 years? How will agricultural irrigation have changed? How will personal/home water use in the United States have changed? How will the global food supply have been affected? What other cultural impacts do you expect the impending water situation to have? ▶



▶ MESSAGE & THEMES

1. How would you describe the “moral” of this story? If you had to summarize the message that the filmmaker was trying to convey in one sentence, what would it be?
2. Did watching the film change your perspective on water and the need for conservation? How? Are there any changes you can make in your own personal environment (or habitual behavior) to improve your personal water footprint? If so, what?
3. How can you affect change in the amount of water usage in your home? On your campus? What is the value of raising awareness of this issue? What physical implementations would improve water efficiency in your home or on your campus? What behavioral changes would improve water efficiency?

MEDIA LITERACY

1. How was this film made? Was it shot on film or video? How was the opening credit sequence created?
2. Is this film better suited to a theatrical presentation (screening in a theater) or a broadcast presentation (screening on TV), in your opinion? Why? (e.g. Who is more likely to take action after viewing this film, a person sitting in a theater or a person sitting in front of their TV?)
3. Given that all documentary subjects are aware of and affected by the filmmakers who follow them, and given that all filmmakers develop attitudes about their subjects and environments, it is arguably impossible to make a truly impartial, truly non-fiction film. To what extent does **Last Call at the Oasis** succeed in this regard? Which moments feel ‘staged’ or manufactured by the filmmaker to achieve a particular effect or emotional response? Which moments feel most candid, objective and/or spontaneous?
4. Would you argue this film was made more to inform or more to persuade? Where does this documentary fall on that spectrum? To what extent is the subject matter controversial, in your opinion? Why?

5. What questions came to your mind as you watched this film? Is there anything you would ask the filmmaker? Is there anything you’d like to ask any of the interviewed experts? If so, what?
6. Who do you think this film was made for? Who is the intended audience?
7. Why was this film made? What was the filmmaker’s primary purpose in your opinion? What other goals do you think the filmmaker had? To what extent do you think those goals were achieved? How can you help these goals to be realized?

POST-VIEWING ACTIVITY

1. Get Involved

Have each student calculate his/her personal water footprint by recording all drinkable water consumption and waste over the course of a predetermined period (e.g. 48 hours, 1 week). Reconvene to compare results, analyze group statistics and collaborate to find a means of reducing your collective water waste by an agreed-upon percentage (say, 10 or 20%) for the subsequent period. See if the target reduction in waste can be achieved without reducing consumption (hydration), AND without noticeably impacting anyone’s daily routine or satisfaction level.

2. Improve Campus Water Conservation

Begin some type of water conservation initiative on your campus. Begin by brainstorming possible ideas, soliciting any permissions and then preparing whichever ideas are optimal to your situation. This can be a multi-day activity that involves fundraising and campaign execution, or it can be an hour spent on a mini-initiative - like posting signs in bathroom stalls or at drinking fountains, writing a class letter to a school or civic official, or collaborating to calculate the group’s collective water footprint.



ARTICLES & REVIEWS

INTERVIEW WITH THE FILMMAKER

FIVE QUESTIONS FOR JESSICA YU

(by Jason Guerrasio, Filmmaker Magazine, September 7, 2011)

For Oscar-winning filmmaker Jessica Yu's latest film, **Last Call at the Oasis**, she looks at the frightening realities of the current global water crisis. Produced through the social issue giants Participant Media, Yu's film has the makings of a must-see like *An Inconvenient Truth* and *Food, Inc.*

Filmmaker Magazine: Tell us a little about what your film is about.

Yu: **Last Call at the Oasis** is about the water crisis, which is global and urgent, yet largely hidden here in the U.S. The film tells stories of people who are on the front lines in dealing with water shortage or contamination, from farmers to scientists to homemakers to the real Erin Brockovich, who is still battling industrial polluters over a decade after the eponymous movie came out.

FM: What motivated you to tell this story?

Yu: Diane Weyermann from Participant Media approached me about the subject, and I was immediately obsessed. It's unfathomable that we could run out of water — something so basic to survival. It's equally unfathomable that we hear so little about the problems we're facing, whether it's trace pharmaceuticals in our water supply or the fact that Lake Mead could run dry in 10 years. Water is complex and political, and I wanted the challenge of exploring the crisis through personal stories



rather than data and information. And on the film geek level, I was excited about the visual possibilities in making a film about water. Our cinematographer Jon Else, got so many gorgeous shots of fountains and streams we started calling it "water porn."

FM: What was the most "eye-opening" fact you learned about the world's water crisis while making this movie?

Yu: Since I live in California, I think it would have to be the precariousness of the state's water situation. Growing up here, I've always been aware of drought, but I was shocked by the time frame in which we could see real disaster. It's no longer an abstraction. One of our experts estimates that the Central Valley aquifer could be depleted in as little as 60 years. The valley supplies a quarter of the produce in the US. That had me googling "moving to Canada" more than a few times.

FM: Were there any films or directors that inspired you in the telling of this story?

Yu: Not directly, but it was nice to have an excuse to watch *Chinatown* and Erin Brockovich again... they served as great reminders that story and character are imperatives in any film about issues.

FM: What do you hope audiences will take away from your film?

Yu: I didn't want the film to be finger-wagging or academic. I wanted it to be satisfying. What's really going on here?

What are we facing? I hope audiences come away feeling they've connected with the people in the film, and that they feel pulled, rather than pushed, into some kind of action. There's so much we could be doing on both a large and small scale to lessen our water problems, and right now most of us just don't think about it. There's actually great hope in that — there's great progress within our reach.



MEDIA LITERACY RESOURCES

SCREENING WITH MEANING

The vast majority of interpersonal human interactions taking place at any given moment are taking place via some type of medium. Every image projected on a screen, every word published on a page, every sound produced from a speaker – each comprises a piece of media content, a media message of some sort. The ability to discern between and understand the vast array of media messages by which we are continually surrounded is an essential skill for young people to develop, particularly in a mainstream commercial culture that targets youth as a vulnerable, impressionable segment of the American marketplace. Most teenage students already have a keen understanding of the languages different media use and the techniques

they employ to inspire particular emotions or reactions.

Analysis of a media message – or any piece of mass media content – can best be accomplished by first identifying its principal characteristics: (1) the physical means by which it is contained and/or delivered, (2) the person(s) responsible for its creation and dissemination, (3) the information, emotions, values or ideas it conveys, (4) the audience to whom it is delivered, and (5) the objectives of its authors and effects of its dissemination.

Students who can readily identify these five core characteristics (abbreviated in this section with the keywords Medium, Author, Content, Audience and Purpose) when faced with mass messages will be equipped to understand the incentives at work behind them, as well as their potential consequences. Media literacy education incentivizes students to become responsible consumers, active citizens and free, critical thinkers. ▶

CORE CONCEPTS OF MEDIA ANALYSIS

MEDIUM

All Mass Media Messages Are Constructed.

How is the message delivered? In what format?
What technologies are used to perpetuate the message?
What expectations do you have of the media content, given its medium and format?

AUTHOR

All Mass Media Messages Are Constructed by Someone.

Who delivers the message?
Who originally constructed the message?
What expectations do you have of the media content, given its author(s)?

CONTENT

All Mass Media Messages Are Constructed Using a Language.

What information, values, emotions or ideas are conveyed by the media content?
What visual elements comprise the media content?
What auditory elements comprise the media content?
To what extent did the content meet your expectations, given the format/author?

AUDIENCE

All Mass Media Messages Reach an Audience.

Who receives the message?
For whom is the message intended?
What is the public reaction to the media content and/or its message?
What is your reaction to the media content and/or its message?
How might others perceive this message differently? Why?

PURPOSE

All Mass Media Messages Are Constructed for a Reason.

Why was the message constructed?
Who benefits from dissemination of the message? How?
To what extent does the message achieve its purpose?
What effect does the message have on the audience it reaches, if any?

THE NON-FICTION FILM

BRIEF HISTORY OF THE DOCUMENTARY

- 1895 Lumiere Brothers develop the first motion picture film reels, capturing brief, unedited clips of life around them called “actualities” (e.g., *Train Arriving at the Station*)
- 1922 Robert Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North* is the first feature-length film to be called a “documentary,” employing the “creative interpretation of reality” to tell a factual story
- 1936 John Grierson releases *Night Mail*, an example of the more poetic, experimental approach to documentary that his movement embodied
- 1963 The cinema vérité movement begins in Europe, shortly followed by “direct cinema” in the U.S. Films of these movements attempt to present factual information objectively and observationally, though many were produced with political or ideological motivations.
- 1999 *The Blair Witch Project* is released, becoming the highest grossing film of all time (relative to its production cost). Marketed and styled as a documentary, the suspense/horror film used the genre to unprecedented effect, fooling millions of filmgoers into believing it was a non-fiction film (obviously enhancing the fear factor). The “mockumentary” has since caught on as a comedic sub-genre.

TYPES OF DOCUMENTARY

All documentaries may be measured along a spectrum of impartiality. Some documentaries attempt to record and present information in as objective and unbiased a manner possible, as if the film were made by a fly on the wall. Other documentaries present real-world information, but do so in a highly obtrusive, manufactured, often biased manner. Arguably no documentary can be 100% unobtrusive to the events it seeks to record (subjects are almost always aware of the presence of a camera, for example), and no documentary can be 100% objective (a single edit represents a subjective filmmaking decision). Media literate students should be able to discern the plausibility and purpose of documentary programs based on their authorship, the nature of their content, the extent to which bias is expressed, etc. Generally, all documentary films and programs occupy one (and sometimes more) of the following categories:

1. **Poetic:** The most abstract type of documentary. The earliest documentaries were essentially poetic; images were organized based on associations and patterns, creating a fragmented, impressionist, lyrical record of actual places, objects and people. Poetic documentaries do not include characters or plots, and were largely made by early filmmakers looking to subvert the coherence and standardization of early narrative films. Some modern music videos can be considered poetic documentaries. Notable examples: *Rain* (Ivens, 1928), *City Symphonies: NY, NY* (Thompson, 1957)

2. **Expository:** Documentaries that speak directly to the viewer (via titles and/or voiceover) in an effort to persuade, convince or educate. Most modern documentary films and

TV programs are primarily expository. Expository docs may be further categorized as follows:

– Persuasive:

- Commercial: Docs that advocate a particular product, service or brand
- Political: Docs that advocate a certain position on political contests/issues
- Theological/Ethical: Docs that advocate a certain position on religious/moral issues
- Topical: Docs that advocate a certain ideological position on social issues ▶



THE NON-FICTION FILM

- ▶ – Educational:
 - Scientific: Docs that attempt to convey factual information on science topics
 - Historical: Docs that attempt to convey factual information on historical topics/periods
 - Biographical: Docs that attempt to convey factual information about individuals
 - Topical: Docs that attempt to convey factual information about social issues

Both persuasive and educational documentaries present information in traditionally efficient ways. Impartial, “omniscient” voice-over narration, on-screen text and insert shots of supporting charts, illustrations, maps, etc. are stylistic techniques common to most expository documentaries. The combination of interview audio and “b-roll” footage of associated visuals is another classic convention of non-fiction filmmaking. It is not uncommon for filmmakers or television producers to take advantage of the credibility that this format lends, and to present fictional (or, at best, debatable) information as factual. Thus, the distinction between a persuasive doc and an educational doc is largely based upon purpose and audience; a film made to argue a point of view or perpetuate a myth may appear no less fictional than an educational doc about photosynthesis.

Expository documentaries are inherently more impactful on the people and environments they attempt to capture than observational docs; but inherently less impactful than participatory docs. The presence of the filmmaker is usually acknowledged and/or obvious (audible interviewer in conversation, voice-over narration, on-screen titles/diagrams/maps/schematics, character interaction with crew, etc.) under the pretense that the filmmaker(s) are

only involved peripherally. Some filmmakers include dramatic re-enactments of story content in their “documentaries”. While this can be as emotionally compelling as a heart-wrenching Hollywood tragedy, it fully removes any pretense of factual impartiality.

3. **Observational:** Docs that attempt to simply and spontaneously observe some part of the world with minimal intervention. Observational films are less abstract than poetic documentaries and less biased or forceful than expository documentaries. Observational docs date back to the 1960s when the advent of mobile lightweight cameras and portable sound recording equipment enabled non-fiction filmmakers to capture events in an organic, unobtrusive way (new celluloid films also needed less light to achieve exposure). This mode of documentary historically avoids stylistic “add-ons” like voice-over commentary, music, titles, re-enactments, etc. These films aimed for immediacy, intimacy and revelation of individual human character in ordinary life situations. Examples: *High School* (Wiseman, 1968); *Gimme Shelter* (Maysles, 1970); *Don't Look Back* (Pennebaker, 1967)

4. **Participatory:** Participatory documentarians rightly believe that it is impossible for the act of filmmaking to not influence or alter the events and characters being filmed. Much like an anthropologist studying a culture by taking part in it, a participatory filmmaker inserts him/herself into the action at hand as a means of inciting and documenting reactions and as a means of making his/her authorship transparent and spontaneous. The encounter between subject and filmmaker inherently becomes a critical component of the film. Autobiographical documentaries are 100% participatory. Examples: *Man with a Movie Camera* (Vertov, 1929), *Sherman's March* (McElwee, 1985), films by Michael Moore.

Adapted from Bill Nichols, Representing Reality (1991) and Introduction to Documentary (2001)



SUPPLEMENTAL RESOURCES

RECOMMENDED MOVIES

Blue Gold: World Water Wars

Flow: For Love of Water

An Inconvenient Truth

The 11th Hour

Earthlings

Food, Inc.

Crude Impact

Erin Brockovich

(Sam Bozzo, Purple Turtle Films, 2008)

(Irena Salina, Group Entertainment, 2008)

(Davis Guggenheim, Participant Media, 2006)

(Leila & Nadia Conners, Appian Way, 2007)

(Shaun Monson, Nation Earth, 2005)

(Robert Kenner, Participant Media, 2008)

(James Wood, Vista Clara Films, 2006)

(Steven Soderbergh, Jersey Films, 2000)

WEB LINKS

Last Call at the Oasis: The Book

http://www.amazon.com/Last-Call-Oasis-Global-Crisis/dp/158648978X/ref=tmm_pap_title_0/189-1037007-7357154

Participant Media Film Homepage

<https://www.participantmedia.com/>

Last Call at the Oasis Trailer on Vimeo

<http://vimeo.com/35914359>

Last Call at the Oasis on IMDB

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2043900/>

Bay Area Water Supply & Conservation Agency

<http://bawsca.org/>

California Water Conservation

<http://www.calwater.com/conservation/index.php>

CA Department of Water Resources

<http://www.water.ca.gov/>

American Water Works Association

<http://www.awwa.org/index.cfm>

US Geological Survey: Water Data

<http://www.usgs.gov/water/>

Info on Pesticides in Groundwater

<http://ga.water.usgs.gov/edu/pesticidesgw.html>

Desertification Wiki

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Desertification>

Hetch Hetchy

<http://bawsca.org/water-supply/hetch-hetchy-water-system/> ▶



▶ Water Links & Resources

Bay Area Water Saving Tips

Erin Brockovich Homepage

The Pacific Institute

2011/12 School Water Education Program (California)

<http://www.wateruseitwisely.com/links-and-resources/index.php#regional>

<http://sanfrancisco.about.com/od/greenliving/qt/waterration.htm>

<http://www.brockovich.com/index.html>

<http://www.pacinst.org/>

<http://www.fssd.com/Files/PublicInformation/SWEP%20Broch%20%286-12%29.pdf>