

NEW YORK TIMES
MOVIE REVIEW | 'DARWIN'S NIGHTMARE'
By A. O. SCOTT
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"Darwin's Nightmare," Hubert Sauper's harrowing, indispensable documentary, is framed by the arrival and departure of an enormous Soviet-made cargo plane at an airstrip outside Mwanza, Tanzania. The plane, with its crew of burly Russians and Ukrainians, will leave Mwanza for Europe carrying 55 tons of processed fish caught by Lake Victoria fisherman and filleted at a local factory. Though Mr. Sauper's investigation of the economy and ecology around the lake ranges far and wide - he talks to preachers and prostitutes, to street children and former soldiers - he keeps coming back to a simple question. What do the planes bring to Africa?

The answers vary. The factory managers say the planes' cavernous holds are empty when they land. One of the Russians, made uncomfortable by the question, mutters something vague about "equipment." Some of his colleagues, and several ordinary Mwanzans, are more forthright: the planes, while they occasionally bring humanitarian food and medical aid, more often bring the weapons that fuel the continent's endless and destructive wars.

In any case, they leave behind a scene of misery and devastation that "Darwin's Nightmare" presents as the agonized human face of globalization. While the flesh of millions of Nile perch is stripped, cleaned and flash-frozen for export to wealthy countries, millions of people in the Tanzanian interior live on the brink of famine. Some of them will eat fried fish heads, which are processed in vast open-air pits infested with maggots and scavenging birds. Along the shores of the lake, homeless children fight over scraps of food and get high from the fumes of melting plastic-foam containers used to pack the fish. In the encampments where the fishermen live, AIDS is rampant and the afflicted walk back to their villages to die.

The Nile perch itself haunts the film's infernal landscape like a monstrous metaphor. An alien species introduced into Lake Victoria sometime in the 1960's, it has devoured every other kind of fish in the lake, even feeding on its own young as it grows to almost grotesque dimensions, and destroying an ancient and diverse ecosystem. To some, its prevalence is a boon, since the perch provides an exportable resource that has brought development money from the World Bank and the European Union. The survival of nearly everyone in the film is connected to the fish: the prostitutes who keep company with the pilots in the hotel bars; the displaced farmers who handle the rotting carcasses; the night watchman, armed with a bow and a few poison-tipped arrows, who guards a fish-related research institute. He is paid \$1 a day and found the job after his predecessor was murdered.

Filming with a skeleton crew - basically himself and another camera operator - Mr. Sauper has produced an extraordinary work of visual journalism, a richly illustrated report on a distant catastrophe that is also one of the central stories of our time. Rather than use voice-over or talking-head expert interviews, he allows the dimensions of the story to emerge through one-on-one conversation and acutely observed visual detail.

But "Darwin's Nightmare" is also a work of art. Given the gravity of Mr. Sauper's subject, and the rigorous pessimism of his inquiry, it may seem a bit silly to compliment him for his eye. There are images here that have the terrifying sublimity of a painting by El Greco or Hieronymus Bosch: rows of huge, rotting fish heads sticking out of the ground; children turning garbage into makeshift toys. At other moments, you are struck by the natural loveliness of the lake and its surrounding hills, or by the handsome, high-cheekboned faces of many of the Tanzanians. The beauty, though, is not really beside the point; it is an integral part of the movie's ethical vision, which in its tenderness and its angry sense of apocalypse seems to owe less to modern ideologies than to the prophetic rage of William Blake, who glimpsed heaven and hell at an earlier phase of capitalist development. Mr. Sauper's movie is clearly aimed at the political conscience of Western audiences, and its implicit critique of some of our assumptions about the shape and direction of the global economy deserves to be taken seriously. But its reach extends far beyond questions of policy and political economy, and it turns the fugitive, mundane facts that are any documentary's raw materials into the stuff of tragedy and prophecy.

The Village Voice

<http://www.villagevoice.com/2005-07-26/film/the-descent-of-man/>

The Descent of Man

Essential doc views globalization through prism of Tanzanian eco-disaster, sees colonialism
Darwin 's Nightmare

by Dennis Lim

August 2nd, 2005 4:16 PM

The Nile perch was introduced to Lake Victoria some 40 to 50 years ago, an apparent attempt to replenish the overfished waters that led to the extinction of hundreds of indigenous species. An oily-fleshed fish that reaches over six feet in length, the Lates niloticus rapidly emerged as the fittest specimen in its new habitat, depleting the food supply and preying on smaller fish (including its young). In a 2001 report, the World Conservation Union deemed the Nile perch one of the planet's 100 "worst invasive alien species." This ongoing ecological disaster happens to be the basis for a multimillion-dollar business: Tanzania, which owns 49 percent of Lake Victoria, is the main exporter of perch to the European Union. Bitter ironies come thick and fast in Hubert Sauper's essential documentary *Darwin's Nightmare*, and the most obvious one may be that this unnatural abundance of a profitable protein source—an economic godsend, if you ask the on-message factory managers and government officials—coexists with inhuman levels of famine and poverty.

Quietly outraged and actively upsetting, *Darwin's Nightmare* spirals out from a case study of one cannibalistic killer to a far bigger and more rapacious fish. The ruthless supremacy of the Nile perch and its devastating effect on the lake's ecosystem constitute a gruesomely resonant metaphor for the impact of global capitalism on local industry. From intimate camcorder interviews with fishermen, fishery workers, cargo pilots, and the prostitutes and street kids on the fringes of this lakeshore economic network, Sauper, an Austrian-born, Paris-based documentarian, constructs a detailed seismograph of predatory free trade's ripple effect.

At one point, after viewing a cautionary video about Lake Victoria at an ecological conference, a Tanzanian minister blithely accuses the filmmakers of accentuating the negative: "What about the beautiful areas?" It's safe to assume he would take greater exception to *Darwin's Nightmare*, a crescendo of dismay that uncovers fresh horrors in almost every scene. Each appalling revelation is topped by a ghastlier one. Not only do the fishermen live in work colonies with no medical care and easy access to HIV-positive prostitutes (a pastor Sauper interviews gently discourages condom use), they're sent home to die before they get too ill, due to the prohibitive cost of corpse transport. Not only can most Tanzanians not afford the thick white perch fillets that are consumed by millions of Europeans daily, they're forced to literally pick on the rotting remains:

Darwin's Nightmare finds its most Brueghelian images at a sort of open-air factory, where ammonia-emitting, maggot-swarmed perch carcasses are dried and fried, repackaged as a local subsistence food. And in an even grimmer form of recycling, the factories' leftover packing materials are collected by children who melt down the plastic and inhale the fumes.

Sauper avoids voice-over and uses sparing titles, but there's no mistaking the film's point of view. In one unapologetic gut-punch sequence, he cuts from the fish dump, where an employee partially blinded by ammonia attests that her life has improved since she started working there, to a European trade delegation droning on about the perch industry's improving infrastructure and cleanliness standards, and in turn to footage of young boys fighting over a few mouthfuls of rice. The film returns repeatedly to the visual motif of Russian cargo planes taking off and landing over Lake Victoria—Sauper at first seems to be making the point that they leave heaving with crates of fish (the wrecks of overloaded planes still dot the airstrip) and fly in empty, a symbol of the take-and-take relationship that the West has long dictated with Africa. But the gradually divulged reality proves worse still: Many of the planes arrive loaded with the weapons that sustain the bloody conflicts raging nearby.

Praising Sauper's *Kisangani Diary*, an account of Rwandan refugees in the Congo, the ethnographer and filmmaker Jean Rouch used the phrase "a cinema of contact." *Darwin's Nightmare* likewise benefits from Sauper's proximity with his subjects, some of whom possess a big-picture understanding of their plight that is of no practical use to them. Perhaps the film's most vivid figure, Raphael, a night watchman with bloodshot eyes, notes that war, besides profiting the powerful, is also an appealing financial option for those lucky enough to join the army. *Darwin's Nightmare* strings together cruel ironies into a work of harrowing lucidity. It illuminates the sinister logic of a new world order that depends on corrupt globalization to put an acceptable face on age-old colonialism.

The Village Voice

Darwin's Director Hubert Sauper on the Ethics of Free Trade and Filmmaking
by Joshua Land
August 2nd, 2005 4:25 PM

How did the project first come about?

I made another movie in the Congo in '97. And the only way to get into the region was to use the U.N. aircraft. I got friendly with the pilots and they said, "Don't think we only bring [humanitarian aid] to the Congo." I said, "What else are you bringing?" "Everything you need for the war." Of course they wouldn't tell me any of this on-camera. But I figured it would be worth a few years of my life to make a movie out of this! So I got to know this world of arms trafficking. Not necessarily illegal arms trafficking but also just arms transport from one government to another. Which is no less of a crime in my eyes.

Did you have any qualms about including the footage of the kids sniffing glue?

Not at all. It was something that I'd seen every day. My attitude is to document as [well] as I can. It doesn't mean that I don't care.

It means [those are the moments] when I was filming. At other moments I was bringing them to the hospital. But that's not the subject of the film. I don't want to send a message that things are going wrong, but I'm a nice guy!

You talk about how the consumer democracy form of capitalism has "won" the global struggle in the Darwinian sense. Do you think there's any way to stop the kind of things we see in this film?

There are two ways. The first is to get much wider awareness of what we're doing by opening [these] markets. The other possible solution is global breakdown. I don't see [how] current developments can keep on going. There's a big difference between knowing and awareness. You don't need me to tell you that kids are starving in Africa. But I can give you a different awareness in the language of art. There isn't anything new in my movie. It's all known. I just give it a face. Somehow that transforms our knowing into understanding. At least that's what I hope.

Debates surrounding the film: Two perspectives

LES KAUFMAN

A Scientist's Letter on the Veracity of the Film, "Darwin's Nightmare"

February 22, 2006

Dear Journalists, Film Lovers, and Concerned Citizens,

Hubert Sauper's documentary, "Darwin's Nightmare", has come under fire from some who feel that the situation and events depicted in the film could not possibly be true. My purpose here is to comment upon the situation as portrayed in the film, based on personal observation and experience, and on the scientific literature. I am a scientist who has been working on the biology and fisheries of Lake Victoria since 1989, including more than twenty visits to the region ranging in length from two weeks to nearly three months. During this time I led a communal research effort that spawned ecological and fisheries restoration projects totaling over 100 million dollars, published many scientific papers, and gave input to regional policy makers. We launched programs to safeguard the endangered aquatic wildlife of the lake, and heard from innumerable people in all walks of life related to the lake and its fisheries. I also worked as a World Bank consultant to help create the Lake Victoria Environmental Management Project, and the Lake Victoria Fisheries Organization. I know Lake Victoria.

I have seen the film three times. It is a very powerful film and to achieve this, Sauper employed narrative devices that some people do not approve of. You can argue with Sauper's aesthetics, choice of talking heads, and attention to the dark side of peoples' lives. But you are not going to have much luck arguing with the facts as presented in the film. The essential points that this film portrays are true.

It really is true that during the filming the number of people outside Africa that fed daily upon pricey exported Nile perch fillets was of the same order as the number of people widely reported by the press (who were quoting UN statistics) as starving to death in Tanzania alone. You can actually go right now on the web to the following URL to see what CNN has to say about food security in East Africa as of a couple of weeks ago: <http://www.cnn.com/2006/WORLD/africa/02/08/kenya.aid.ap/index.html>. French film historian Francois Garcon contests the place of Lake Victoria Nile perch in the story as told in the film, claiming that 74% of the Nile perch caught from Lake Victoria are not exported, and that 40% are consumed locally. I do not know where he got his numbers from, but they do not match anything that I have seen reported elsewhere, and are utterly inconsistent with my own observations and experiences at lakeside. Somewhere around 200,000 metric tons of fish (annual catches and estimates of them vary) are caught from the lake each year. They dress out, as a crude estimate, to a bit less than half that weight. The transport planes depicted in the film left Mwanza at least twice daily, each with 50 metric tons of fillets. That is just Mwanza; planes also fly out of Kenya and Uganda. At two flights a day, that would be roughly 200,000 pounds of fish protein (taking into account the weight of packaging), enough to feed quarter-pound portions to 800,000 people. Two loads per day out of Mwanza are on the low side, and that is just one point of export. Even if we figure on European portions, that is a lot of full tummies someplace...but not in Africa. Huge numbers of people are starving right near the lake that supplies so much food to the rest of the world. That is a simple fact.

Whose fault is it that Africans starve while hundreds of thousands of tons of high quality fish protein go overseas? And is it not true that the fish transport planes are primary agents of the arms trade to central Africa? Perhaps the film does convey a simplistic view of a complex problem, as claimed by Garcon. That does not change the nature or the existence of the problem. Maybe good journalism and a free press can turn up some more definitive answers, but shooting the messenger is not going to help anybody.

As the film also depicts, thousands of jobs were created by the packing plants, of which there are currently ten in Tanzania alone. But does this represent an increase in the number of jobs per capita? We have to consider the hordes of people attracted to the lake basin in the hopes of getting a job. Most of these do not succeed, so they just hang out and hang on when their dreams elude them. You must also take into account the jobs and social fabric that were destroyed in the transformation from the old fisheries to the new. All through Africa and indeed much of the world, women traditionally are the fishmongers, bringing income to the family. But they need fish to sell, and the industrialized Nile perch fishery has created a hermetically sealed fish meat pipeline that nearly cuts out that traditional economic sector. Diabolically, the product now available to the women is the frame and head left

over when the fillets are taken for export. And those frames and heads, only with connections. The life-giving connections are enhanced by another kind of connection that aggravates the region's struggle with HIV/AIDS. Not only that, the frames that can be had have often been poorly handled and are rotten and maggoty by the time they get to the smoker. Not always, but often, just as depicted in the film.

It is also true that only a tiny proportion of Lake Victoria commercial fish product (other than frames) is consumed locally. The stuff is too damned expensive. Not only Nile perch, but even other species, such as tilapia, are out of range of the average citizen. By 2000 it was actually blowing my own budget to purchase fish at market or roadside, except as an occasional treat. I like smoked tilapia very much, so I'd haggle for it along the Jinja-Kampala road in my field fatigues, accompanied by well-dressed businessmen and women from the big city. As a fish biologist I am lucky because my colleagues and I can just go fishing for data and then eat our study specimens when we are done taking measurements and samples. Others are not so lucky. Since at least the late 1990's, quality fresh fish of any kind has been a luxury item for the urban elite, foreign diplomats, and wealthy tourists. A close friend from Kenya told me the other day that local hotel managers are starting to find it beyond their means to serve fish in the hotel restaurants. It is also important to know that among the hundreds of endemic (occurring nowhere else in the world) species of fishes driven extinct or nearly so by the massive ecological transformations in Lake Victoria, there are about a dozen delicious and locally prized food fishes that are now extremely scarce. The last refuge of the poor was a tiny minnow, known in Tanzania as "dagaa," that can be dried and eaten as whitebait. But dagaa are sometimes worth more as an additive for chicken feed than as food for the poor, so these, too are funneled into food for the rich.

Right there in the film my good colleague Professor Phillip Bwathondi, head of fisheries research in Tanzania, makes a reasonable plea that the world should see a balanced view of Lake Victoria, the good along with the bad. Many times the film alludes to the good- the money flowing into the region, the new jobs, the new rich- but the good of the Nile perch fishery is clearly not the film's primary focus. Net regional wealth and the number of wealthy people very obviously increased during my time in East Africa. I saw this in a surge of pretty houses and gardens and gated communities going up around the lake. You won't see many of these in the film, nor was much of the magnificent scenery, lovely happy people, and beautiful wildlife of the region in evidence. In the balance, though, only a very small proportion of the people in the lake basin have enjoyed a much improved life by virtue of the Nile perch export fishery.

So in sum, there has, after all, been some positive impact from the globalization of the exotic Nile perch fishery in the Lake Victoria Basin. "Darwin's Nightmare" simply suggests that the benefit happens to pale against the mountain of misery that came along with it. This is consistent with my own observations. Of course, that shouldn't be the case: the hundreds of millions of dollars generated by the Nile perch fishery should be improving lives, advancing education, alleviating poverty across the board. So is it true that this is not happening? Who is responsible for critically testing this assertion?

The burden of proof here is not on the film or the filmmaker, but on the leaders in the region, and on the international agencies with whom they have labored to subsidize the creation and rules of engagement for the Nile perch fishery. It is up to them to engage an unbiased party to weigh the evidence, consider the facts, and erase doubts about the stark picture presented by this film. So far, we have seen only protest letters, not careful analysis or critical review. What I can tell you is that the original plans for the EU and World Bank projects on Lake Victoria- the downside of globalization aside- were quite good. They included things like a cess on Nile perch to go to fishery sustainability and environmental restoration. There was an education outreach program for the lake basin. There was a large biodiversity research and conservation program to preserve both the environmental machinery that maintains the lake (including the hundreds of endangered fish species), and the economically valuable wildlife and wildlife habitats around the lake. There was active stakeholder involvement, and the lakeside residents were asked to list the material benefits that they and their communities would most like to see from the fishery. It's just that these projects have not gone altogether according to plan. In fact, the four components just mentioned (financial sustainability, education outreach, biodiversity conservation, stakeholder consideration), have failed to come to pass in a meaningful way. There has been some good. The fishery infrastructure has been built up along with better roads and such. And, a vibrant crop of young Africans have obtained advanced degrees with support from these two big fisheries aid projects. Hopefully this next generation of scientists and leaders can make a difference to the people and the environment of Lake Victoria, and not just by relocating piles of paper in offices.

The situation about Lake Victoria is actually worse than the film showed, for there are new developments. First off, the Nile perch fishery is being managed into the ground, and not for lack of knowing better. It is just short of a miracle that there are any Nile perch left to export, and these are looking rather shy lately. (The packers actually like the smaller fish- portion control- but only down to so small). Second, the effects of a regional drought have been compounded by stunningly irrational water management decisions, causing an electric power crisis and political friction with the Egypt, downstream along the River Nile. That's been getting most of the press the last few weeks. They call it "pulling the plug on Lake Victoria."

Both situations could have been avoided, and can still be repaired. Scientists of the fishery research institutes in Tanzania, Uganda, and Kenya have worked closely together with that funding from the World Bank and the European Union- working as a regional team for the first time since Idi Amin- and have repeatedly come up with sound advice on how to make the Nile perch fishery sustainable. They continue to gather new data and, as part of the international community of science, regularly reexamine and update their advice to decision makers. Yes, indeed, if Sauper had actually interviewed a Tanzanian fishery scientist in addition to the Tanzanian Fishery Research Institute's askari (nightwatchman), perhaps this would have made it into the film. However, had this happened and had the scientists been as outspoken as the nightwatchman, they would have stood an excellent chance of being

sacked by the government. Anyway, most of their scientific advice has not been put into force. The fishery has declined, and will most likely continue to do so unless political leaders decide that children and grandchildren are as important as money in the hand today. Of course, this problem is not unique to Lake Victoria. It is the story of industrial fisheries all over the world, which is what makes this story so transportable overseas, just like the perch filets themselves. In New England, where I come from, when people trash the fisheries (which we have) fishermen's families do suffer but they generally do not die. We do not have millions of folk hovering here between life and death from starvation or AIDS. That is the difference, and the high tragedy of the story told in the film.

My colleagues and I have learned a few things in our years of work in Lake Victoria. We learned that the Nile perch fishery could be sustained. We learned that at the same time, many of the hundreds of species of native fishes that are not yet extinct could be brought back to abundance, including traditional food fishes. We learned that enduring ecological health, though a different health than before, could be restored to Lake Victoria; and that the secret to doing so lies in a balance between the new and the old lake biology and socioeconomics. "Darwin's Nightmare" simply shows the fact that what could happen, hasn't happened. The knowledge to do it is there, quite some resources to do it are available, but the will is someplace else.

Two weeks from today will mark the end of the seventeenth year that I have been working on the science of Lake Victoria. Compared to some amongst my circle of colleagues, I am still a newcomer. Needless to say, "Darwin's Nightmare" has been much the topic of the day in our community, both those African-born and African-adopted, like me. All of us were shocked and depressed by this film. We reacted that way because to us, East Africa pulls on our heartstrings with a power and poignancy equal to, perhaps greater than, our own birth homes. To us, Lake Victoria is a place of beauty, majesty, fascination, wonder and love. We have experienced all of this, alongside the everyday tragedy that you can see accurately portrayed in the film. I have seen it with my own eyes, and studied the material basis of this tragedy for many, many years. The film shows mostly the tragedy. But this tragedy is no lie.

Sincerely,

Les Kaufman
Professor of Biology
Boston University Marine Program
Center for Ecology and Conservation Biology
Pew Fellow in Marine Conservation
And
Senior Principal Investigator,
Marine Management Area Science
Conservation International

NICK FLYNN
Darwin's Nightmare & The World Bank
17 mars 2006

Two weeks ago the World Bank in Washington D.C. screened the documentary film Darwin's Nightmare for about 70 bank workers. I was present, along with Les Kaufman, a marine biologist who has spent the last 17 years working to salvage Lake Victoria. Dr. Kaufman is one of the scientists that Hubert Sauper, the director of Darwin's Nightmare, worked closely with while researching his film. I also worked closely with Sauper, traveling with him in Tanzania to assist in any way I could—holding the microphone, guarding equipment, waiting in this office or that for an official to appear with a needed document. I am also credited with being an "artistic collaborator" on the film—in many respects, a film like this is a conceptual project, and thereby entails much discussion to sort through the gathered images and facts in order to come to some semblance of "the truth". A difficult project, certainly, but I can attest that Sauper was scrupulous in ferreting out his information, in some instances relying on the research of scientists like Kaufman and others, and at other times simply synthesizing facts that are readily available to anyone interested in finding them out, such as the tonnage of fish that flies out daily, or the number of dead in the Congo in the last few years as a result of armed conflict. None of these facts are in serious dispute—the fish goes somewhere, the guns come from somewhere. The difficult part, the part that makes this film art, was in constructing a narrative around these facts, in the attempt to make the incomprehensible comprehensible.

After the screening at the World Bank there was a heated panel discussion. I was on the panel, as well as Les Kaufman, a couple economists from the World Bank, and a fisheries representative from Tanzania. The film seemed to move some members of the audience, yet many seemed content to quote numbers, such as the GDP in Tanzania being up 7% this year. I pointed out that the problem with a figure like this is that it doesn't take into account the distribution of that wealth. They did not have this figure, nor could they say what percentage of the \$300 million dollars the export of Nile perch brings into the region that actually stays in the region. The fish plant owner depicted in the film was quite candid in our conversations with him that he leaves none of his money in Tanzania, preferring safer investments, such as hotels in Canada. I pointed this out to the members of the World Bank, and suggested that it would be worthwhile to recalculate their numbers with this in mind. It is not so far fetched to imagine, I said, that all the fish plant owners feel the same as the one presented in the film, and thereby very little of that \$300 million would

actually benefit the average Tanzanian, beyond the bribes needed to keep the machine oiled.

Should I not mention bribes here? Our host at the World Bank took me aside after the panel and the shouting had died down, and informed me that it was perhaps hard for me to understand, that it was very complicated, that the local governments were so corrupt, that the money just disappears. Yes, I said, the local governments are bribed, but who is it that bribes them? And where does the money come from to bribe them? And why is it spent? And is he who offers the bribe less to blame than he who takes it? The reason for the bribe is quite simple—to facilitate the flow of fish out of the country (you could substitute whatever resource you wish here: diamonds from Sierra Leone, bananas from Guatemala). It seems, I said to our host, actually quite simple—since the World Bank controls the purse strings, it would be every easy to direct where the money goes. If, say, the World Bank dictated that 50% of the fish had to remain in Tanzania at a price the locals could afford, that would be fairly simple to monitor. If food security for Africa were a priority, that is.

Eirik Jansen, a sociologist from Oslo University who works for the Norwegian Embassy, was also extensively consulted in the making of the film. Dr. Jensen has spent 20 years working on food security around Lake Victoria, yet for some reason the letter he sent in support of Darwin's Nightmare wasn't included in the handout distributed at the World Bank screening, though it had been forwarded to our host. In it Dr. Jensen points out that 90% of the Nile perch above 1kg goes for export to the 35 factories around the Lake, and the local people are left with Nile perch fingerlings and perch of such poor quality that the factories will not take them. And yes, just as portrayed in the film, the locals are left the bones of fish to eat. That local people eat the bones and heads that are left behind is another fact that is not seriously in dispute, though it is deeply disturbing.

During the panel discussion a question was asked as to why the film didn't show the good that development had brought to the Lake. I offered that we could have shown the one major road project being completed by an Italian construction company while we were filming, a very high-tech road that connected the fish factory with the airport, thus assuring the fish a speedier transport out of Africa. I doubted that was the kind of good they wanted shown, and even the audience of the World Bank laughed at this. The rest of the infrastructure—schools, hospitals, roads, water—these do exist in a minimal fashion in Mwanza, often due to missionary work or NGOs. But go a half hour from the center and it is deeply 3rd world, with a few more high-tech flourishes (freezers, trucks) to facilitate the removal of resources. Yes, these factories have provided jobs to the area, but as Eirik Jansen's research has shown, for every job created in the export industry, 6-8 jobs were lost in the informal sector.

I spent some time on the coast of Tanzania before going to Lake Victoria, and during that time I was working on a book that dealt, in part, with homelessness in the United States. When I mentioned homelessness to people on the coast, an area which is more traditional and doesn't have any great resource to be exported, no one knew what I was talking about. What is homelessness? they asked. If you have seen the film you will know that no one in Mwanza would ever ask that question—homelessness is all around them. 50% of the children around Lake Victoria are malnourished, and now 3.5 million in Tanzania face starvation, up from 2 million when the film was completed.

Some claim that "Darwin's Nightmare" suggests that fish are being traded directly for weapons—a claim that anyone who was even half-awake during to the film would be embarrassed to make, for fear of showing a gross ignorance of the most basic forces of globalization. As the film suggests, the fish leave for one reason, the guns come in for another, and often, not always, on the same planes. Often the guns are not unloaded in the same city the fish are loaded in, often the money for fish is in no way connected to the money for weapons, that's Globalization 101. That Hubert Sauper left that for the viewers to surmise reveals only that he trusts the intelligence of his audience, the vast majority of whom got it.

One of the great strengths of this film is that we are left with a great, if unsettling, compassion for all of the characters—the pilots, the fish factory owner, the homeless kids, the prostitutes, the fishermen—we are left with a deeper understanding of why they do what they do, caught up as they are in the same self-devouring system, where the few profit so excessively over the many. It's an old story. I actually heard myself announcing to the World Bank last week that I was not a communist, but that the game of capitalism as it is practiced at ground-zero Lake Victoria is deeply unjust, and ultimately life-threatening to millions, and that is the simple message of the film.

I remember before being part of this film that I would read the headlines (New York Times, mostly) about Africa and think, Maybe Africans are insane—famine and war, famine and war, forever. By showing where some of the food goes and where most of the guns come from, Hubert Sauper has done us all a great, eye-opening, fog-lifting service. He has revealed what is beneath the most obvious layer of reality that one might see on a short trip to Lake Victoria. In doing so it has become more difficult to claim the problem is very, very complicated. Perhaps the solution is very, very simple.

Nick Flynn
author of "Encore une nuit de merde dans cette ville pourrie"
(Gallimard-Du Monde Entier)

Text from filmmaker's website: www.darwinsnightmare.com

Synopsis

Darwin's Nightmare is a tale about humans between the North and the South, about globalization, and about fish. Some time in the 1960's, in the heart of Africa, a new animal was introduced into Lake Victoria as a little scientific experiment. The Nile Perch, a voracious predator, extinguished almost the entire stock of the native fish species. However, the new fish multiplied so fast, that its white fillets are today exported all around the world.

Huge hulking ex-Soviet cargo planes come daily to collect the latest catch in exchange for their southbound cargo... Kalashnikovs and ammunitions for the uncounted wars in the dark center of the continent.

This booming multinational industry of fish and weapons has created an ungodly globalized alliance on the shores of the world's biggest tropical lake: an army of local fishermen, World bank agents, homeless children, African ministers, EU-commissioners, Tanzanian prostitutes and Russian pilots.

Origins of the Nightmare

The idea of this film was born during my research on another documentary, KISANGANI DIARY that follows Rwandese refugees in the midst of the Congolese rebellion. In 1997, I witnessed for the first time the bizarre juxtaposition of two gigantic airplanes, both bursting with food. The first cargo jet brought 45 tons of yellow peas from America to feed the refugees in the nearby UN camps. The second plane took off for the European Union, weight with 50 tons of fresh fish.

I met the Russian pilots and we became "kamarads". But soon it turned out that the rescue planes with yellow peas also carried arms to the same destinations, so that the same refugees that were benefiting from the yellow peas could be shot at later during the nights.

In the mornings, my trembling camera saw in this stinking jungle destroyed camps and bodies.

First hand knowledge of the story of such a cynical reality became the trigger for DARWIN'S NIGHTMARE, my longest ever cinematographic commitment.

The Location

"In the Eastern Congo alone, the casualties of war on each single day equal the number of deaths of September 11th in New York."

Said to be the birthplace of mankind, "The Great Lakes Region" is the green, fertile and mineral rich center of Africa.

The region is also known for its unique wild life, snowy volcanoes and famous National Parks. At the same time, it is truly the "Heart of Darkness" of our world.

Massive epidemics, food shortages and of course civil wars rage in this area, taking place in a kind of moral oblivion. These armed conflicts are the deadliest ones in history since the second World War. In the Eastern Congo alone, the casualties of war on each single day equal the number of deaths on September 11th in New York.

If not totally ignored, the uncountable wars are often qualified as "tribal conflicts", like those of Rwanda, Burundi or Sudan. The hidden causes of such troubles are, in most cases, imperialistic interests in natural resources.

Filming In the Heart of Darkness

To shoot DARWIN'S NIGHTMARE we used a minimalist unit: my faithful travel companion Sandor, my small camera and I. We had to be very close to our "characters" and follow their lives over long periods. I feel like they are an important part of my existence now. When you look out for contrasts and contradictions, reality can become "bigger than life". So in a way it was easy to find striking images because I was filming a striking reality. But it was also easy to get into trouble.

On location in Tanzania we could never really show up as a regular film team. In order to fly with cargo planes we had to disguise ourselves as pilots and loadmasters and carry fake identities. In villages we were mistaken as missionaries, and in fish factories managers feared we might be EU hygiene inspectors. We had to become Australian businessmen in the fancy hotel bars, or just harmless backpackers in the African bush, "taking pictures". Many many days were lost in front of sweating, confused and questioning police officers, on checkpoints and in local prisons. A good part of the filming budget was wasted just paying for our freedom in bribes and fines. The national newspaper headlines and even the BBC in London declared, "French and American journalists kidnapped by bandits on Lake Victoria". Since the writer Nick Flynn from NY was travelling with us, the US embassy in Dar es Salaam started frantically ringing the alarm for their lost citizens. There was no kidnapping, however, but once again we had been held back on a remote fishing island - this time accused of shooting "blue movies" with naked girls. Forced idleness became a dull routine. We would sit in the merciless equatorial sun surrounded by a million Nile Perch skeletons, the local's food, trying not to go mad.

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Director's Statement

Survival of the Fittest?

The old question, which social and political structure is the best for the world seems to have been answered. Capitalism has won. The ultimate forms for future societies are "consumer democracies", which are seen as "civilized" and "good". In a Darwinian sense the "good system" won. It won by either convincing its enemies or eliminating them.

In DARWIN'S NIGHTMARE I tried to transform the bizarre success story of a fish and the ephemeral boom around this "fittest" animal into an ironic, frightening allegory for what is called the New World Order. I could make the same kind of movie in Sierra Leone, only the fish would be diamonds, in Honduras, bananas, and in Libya, Nigeria or Angola, crude oil. Most of us I guess, know about the destructive mechanisms of our time, but we cannot fully picture them. We are unable to "get it", unable to actually believe what we know.

It is, for example, incredible that wherever prime raw material is discovered, the locals die in misery, their sons become soldiers, and their daughters are turned into servants and whores. Hearing and seeing the same stories over and over makes me feel sick. After hundreds of years of slavery and colonisation of Africa, globalisation of african markets is the third and deadliest humiliation for the people of this continent. The arrogance of rich countries towards the third world (that's three quarters of humanity) is creating immeasurable future dangers for all peoples.

"I could make the same kind of movie in Sierra Leone, only the fish would be diamonds, in Honduras, bananas, and in Libya, Nigeria or Angola, crude oil."

It seems that the individual participants within a deadly system don't have ugly faces, and for the most part, no bad intentions. These people include you and me. Some of us are "only doing their job" (like flying a jumbo from A to B carrying napalm), some don't want to know, others simply fight for survival. I tried to film the personalities in this documentary as intimately as possible. Sergey, Dimond, Raphael, Eliza: real people who wonderfully represent the complexity of this system, and for me, the real enigma.
