

Darwin's Nightmare

Austria/Belgium/Canada /France/Finland /Sweden | 2004 | 107 minutes

Credits

Director	Hubert Sauper
Screenplay	Hubert Sauper
Photography	Hubert Sauper
Editing	Denise Vindevogel

In Brief

When the Nile Perch was introduced into Lake Victoria in the 1960s, it multiplied exponentially and destroyed the native species of fish, giving rise to a new industry which exports worldwide. Sauper's Oscar-nominated, "harrowing, indispensible documentary" (New York Times) profiles the Tanzanians scraping together a living on the lake while revealing the awful purpose for which much of this newly created wealth is used for.

As carefully structured as narrative fiction, Darwin's Nightmare artfully manipulates its documentary materials around its chief subject and chief metaphor: the voracious Nile perch that has destroyed both the ecosystem and the socioeconomic life around Tanzania's Lake Victoria, the world's largest tropical lake. Introduced into the lake as an experiment at some unknown date nearly half a century ago, the Nile perch thrived and eventually decimated the rest of the fish population, while the subsequent exploitation of the perch for the European market effectively enslaved the native Tanzanian population. The picture Sauper presents is unrelentingly grim, yet even while piling a final, even more awful revelation upon evident disaster, the film never turns into a monotonous parade of horrors; Sauper is after understanding, not despair. Darwin's Nightmare would make a telling double bill with Jia Zhangke's *The World* (2004), suggesting that while in Beijing the rapacity of globalization is required to hide behind the mask of cosmopolitan glamour, in Tanzania it is free to show its ugliest face.



An airport lies near the lake in the village of Mwanza, its runway surrounded by debris from crashed planes. Largely piloted by Russians and Ukrainians, aircraft arrive several times a day to transport the day's catch back to Europe. Although the perch are rapaciously abundant, the exorbitant price they command on the European market dictates that the native Tanzanians cannot enjoy their own "natural" bounty; they subsist on fried fish heads and the meat rejected by Europeans. The fishermen can barely make a living, women have few options other than prostitution, HIV runs rampant, and the streets are filled with glue-sniffing orphans.

Though blame is certainly there to be assigned, Sauper is not simply out to point fingers. The situation depicted in Darwin's Nightmare is particularly dismal because the only villain is an abstract ideology which entraps its practitioners as much as its victims. While the Ukrainian and Russian pilots are certainly more privileged than the Tanzanians, they often succumb to the stresses of their dangerous job and risk their lives by overloading their planes with fish. European Union bureaucrats seem hopelessly detached from African reality rather than ill-intentioned, while the Tanzanian government itself remains virtually invisible in the face of their people's suffering.

The ugliness of the situation, unfortunately, finds its way into the aesthetic as well. If Darwin's Nightmare has a major flaw, it is its crude videography: interiors are muddy, night scenes murky. However, the sun-bleached backgrounds, light glares and bleeding colours suit the film at times; attractively framed and lit racks of rotting, maggot-covered fish carcasses wouldn't necessarily be any more expressive. Sauper's direction is a step above Robert Greenwald's degree-zero aesthetics—or much recent, polemically-driven work made by people who know more about activism than filmmaking—because he knows how to make the best artistic use of his limited resources.

Raymond Depardon's *Africa: What About the Pain?* (1996) sums up the relentlessly downbeat tone of most Western-made documentaries about Africa, and while Darwin's Nightmare is no exception to this model, neither is it completely hopeless. The residents of Mwanza are dignified, devoid of self-pity and as articulate as their command of English allows them to be. (While the vast majority of dialogue is spoken in English, the film is nevertheless subtitled.) They're resigned to an incredibly difficult situation, treating it as a fact of life, most memorably a man who guards a research fishery, armed with poisoned arrows to ward off the thieves who killed his predecessor, who speaks with disarming matter-of-factness about looking forward to another war so that he can reclaim the soldier's salary he once pulled down.

The ironic complexity of this man's sentiments indicates how Sauper is after something deeper than an accusatory broadside. He's searching for a system rather than a situation, which he anchors around the question of whether the cargo planes, supposedly arriving empty from Europe, are in fact carrying weapons destined for the numerous trans-African conflicts. The answer, chillingly and unsurprisingly, appears to be yes. As EU representatives speak glibly about the Africans' entrepreneurial skills while turning a blind eye to arms sales to the Congo and Angola, several of Sauper's interview subjects plainly explain why both Europeans and Africans might prefer war to peace. Yet these kinds of grim ironies can be useful as well. Globalization has wreaked havoc on Tanzania, but as a consequence, it may make the world's interconnections plainer; and Sauper, with dogged persistence and fine artistry, puts in the

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hard work of exposing the chain of responsibility. In 1995, Janet Maslin foolishly described Larry Clark's Kids as "a wake-up call to the world." As essential as it is harrowing, Darwin's Nightmare truly fits that bill.

—Steve Erickson

Director's Statement

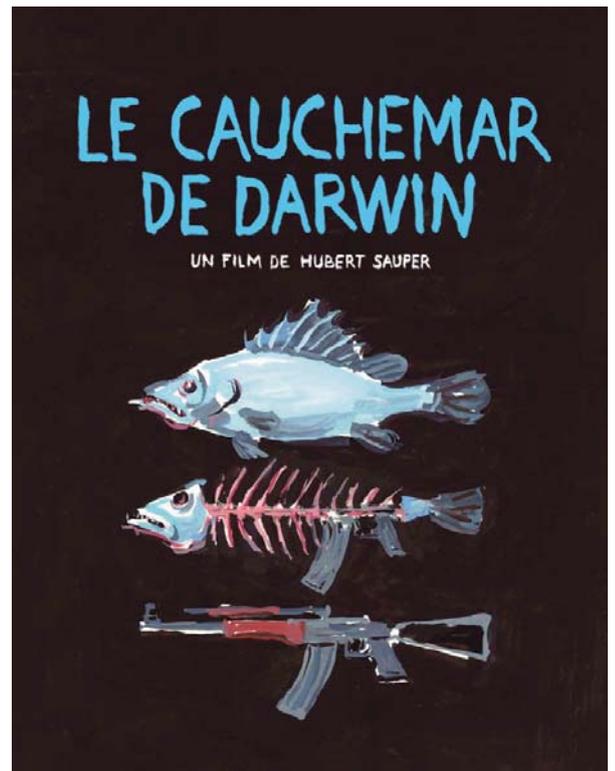
Survival of the Fittest?

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.

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.



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