The Descent of Man

Essential doc views globalization through prism of Tanzanian eco-disaster, sees colonialism

by Dennis Lim

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.