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# Darwin's Nightmare

A film by Hubert Sauper

France/Austria/Belgium – 2004 – Color – 107 min – 35mm – 1:66 – Dolby SRD

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Distribution Contact: Wendy Lidell  
212-777-5690

[wlidell@internationalfilmcircuit.com](mailto:wlidell@internationalfilmcircuit.com)

# DARWIN'S NIGHTMARE

A film by Hubert Sauper

**Best Documentary - European Film Awards**  
**Best Documentary – Silverdocs**  
**Grand Prize - Environmental Film Festival Paris**  
**Venice Film Festival - Europa Cinemas Label Jury Award**  
**Vienna Film Prize – Viennale**  
**National Film Board Documentary Award – Montreal New Fest**  
**Best Film – Copenhagen Dox**  
**New Directors New Films, New York**  
**Toronto International Film Festival**  
**San Sebastian International Film Festival**

Feeling more like sci-fi/horror than documentary, **DARWIN'S NIGHTMARE** is the stranger-than-fiction tale of two relentless killing machines: the Nile Perch which, over the course of a few decades, ate through everything that used to live in Tanzania's Lake Victoria; and the foreign capitalists who introduced that non-native fish in order to sell it to European consumers.

Losing out to both of these were the local Tanzanians who once lived off the lake's bounty, and now, literally, are left with bones and rotting carcasses. When things take an even stranger turn, thanks to an astounding third-act revelation, the relentlessness becomes a cautionary tale it may not be too late to heed.

In the heart of Africa some time in the 1960's, a new fish was introduced artificially into Lake Victoria as a little scientific experiment. Consequently, the *Nile perch* extinguished almost the entire stock of the native fish species. The voracious predator 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 food and weapons has created an ungodly globalized alliance on the shores of the world's biggest tropical lake: an army of young fishermen, Indian factory owners, African ministers, EU-commissioners, Russian pilots and Tanzanian prostitutes.

## Notes from the Director:

### 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 form for future societies seem to be "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 observation in Sierra Leone, only the perch would be a diamond, in Honduras, a banana, and in Libya, Nigeria or Angola... the fish would be 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, so incredible, that wherever prime raw material is discovered, the locals systematically 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 European colonization of Africa, the effects of market globalization are only the most recent and deadliest humiliation for the people of this continent. The arrogant attitude of the rich countries towards the third world (that's three quarters of humanity) is creating immeasurable future dangers for all peoples.

**"Wherever prime raw material is discovered, the locals die in misery, their sons become soldiers and their daughters are turned into servants and whores."**

It seems that the individual participants within this deadly system have no ugly faces, and for the most part, no bad intentions. These people include you and me. Some of us are "only doing our job" (like flying a jet 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, they represent the real enigma.

**"I could make the same kind of observation in Sierra Leone, only the perch would be a diamond, in Honduras, a banana, and in Libya, Nigeria or Angola... the fish would be crude oil."**

### **Origins of the Nightmare**

The idea of this film was born during my research on another documentary, KISANGANI DIARY, which follows the 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, heaving with 50 tons of fresh fish.

I met the Russian pilots and we became "kamarads". But soon it became clear that the rescue planes with yellow peas also carried arms into the same destinations so that the same refugees that were benefiting from the yellow peas could be shot at later in the night. In the mornings, what my trembling camera saw in this stinking jungle were bodies and destroyed camps.

Knowing the chronology and faces of such a cynical reality from within became the trigger for DARWIN'S NIGHTMARE, my longest ever cinematographic commitment.

### **The Middle of the World.**

"The Great Lakes Region" is the green, fertile and mineral rich center of Africa, and is said to be the birthplace of mankind. The area is commonly 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. The civil wars that rage in this area take place in a kind of moral oblivion. They are by far the deadliest conflicts since World War II. In the Congo alone, the casualties of war equal the number of deaths on September 11<sup>th</sup> in NY, but *every day* of the year. If not totally ignored, the uncountable wars are often qualified as "tribal conflicts", like those of Rwanda and Burundi. The hidden causes of such troubles are, in most cases, imperialistic interests in natural resources.

**"In the Congo alone, the casualties of war equal the number of deaths of September 11<sup>th</sup> in NY, but *every day* of the year."**

## **In the Heart of Darkness**

To shoot DARWIN'S NIGHTMARE we used a minimalist unit: my faithful travel companion Sandor, my small camera and me. 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 salvation missionaries, the fish factory managers feared we could be hygiene inspectors from the EU. We had to be 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 production 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. For us it had become a kind of dull routine to be hindered from working and to just sit in the merciless equatorial sun surrounded by a million Nile perch skeletons, trying not to go mad.

**"It was easy to find striking images, because I was filming a striking reality. But it was also easy to get into trouble."**

## Hubert Sauper

Was born in a small village of Tyrol, Austrian Alps. He lived in Great Britain, Italy, the USA, and since ten years in France. He studied film directing in Vienna (Univ. of Performing Arts) and in Paris (Univ. de Paris VIII.) and graduated B.A.(Mag. art) Hubert teaches film classes in Europe and USA. The last two documentaries he wrote and directed were awarded twelve international film prizes.

As an actor he played in several shorts and two feature length films:

**“IN THE CIRCLE OF THE IRIS”** (Dir. Peter Patzak, with Philippe Léotard) and  
**“BLUE DISTANCE”** (Dir. Peter Schreiner).

### Filmography (as writer and director)

**BLASI** (1990, Short fiction, Austria, 15min, 16mm)  
Prix Max Ophüls.

**ON THE ROAD WITH EMIL** (1993, Documentary, Austria, 30min 16mm)  
Best short film Int. Festival Würzburg 1994.  
Best documentary Nexon, France 1995.

**SO I SLEEPWALK IN BROAD DAYLIGHT** (1994, fiction, Austria, 55min, 16mm)  
Premio da casa da Figueira da Foz, Portugal 1995  
Best first film, Best film school production

**LOMOGRAPHER’S MOSCOW** (1995, Documentary, Russia, 30 min, for TV)

**KISANGANI DIARY** (1998, Documentary, France/Austria, 45min, 35mm)  
PARIS — Cinéma du réel Grand Prix du meilleur Film 1998  
ST. PETERSBURG — “Centaur 98” for Best Documentary Film  
NEW YORK — Gold prize for Best Documentary, NY Film Expo 1999  
KRAKOW — “Don Quihote Prize” 1998  
LONDON — One World Media Award 2nd prize 1998  
NÜRNBERG — 1st Human rights award for best film 1999  
BERLIN — “Forum of young cinema” 48th international film festival  
MONTEVIDEO — Special jury mention  
KARLOVY VARY — Special jury prize for documentary 1998

**ALONE WITH OUR STORIES - SEULE AVEC NOS HISTOIRES** (2000,  
*Documentary, France, 60min, DigiBeta, for TV*)  
GENEVA/NY/L.A. — International Humanitarian Award

## **DARWIN'S NIGHTMARE - CREDITS**

France/Austria/Belgium – 2004 – Color – 107 min – 35mm – 1:85 – dolby SRD

Written and directed by Hubert Sauper  
Artistic Collaboration, assistant director Sandor Rieder, Nick Flynn  
Cinematographer Hubert Sauper  
Film Editor Denise Vindevogel  
Sound design Veronika Hlavatsch  
Sound engineer Cosmas Antoniadis

Producers:  
Edouard Mauriat  
Antonin Svoboda  
Martin Gschlacht  
Hubert Toint  
Hubert Sauper

Produced by:  
Mille et une productions, Paris  
Coop99 Film Produktion, Vienna  
Saga film, Bruxelles

In collaboration with:  
ARTE and WDR  
Commissioning editor Sabine Rollberg  
And  
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SVT Stockholm  
YLE 2 Helsinki

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télédiffuseurs wallons

<http://www.coop99.at/darwins-nightmare/>  
<http://www.hubertsauper.com>