

THE MODERN JUNGLE

a film by charles fairbanks and saul kak



THE MODERN JUNGLE

Produced & Directed by:
Charles Fairbanks & Saul Kak

71 minutes, Mexico / USA

Zoque & Spanish with English, Spanish, French subtitles

Spanish title: La Selva Negra

website:

themodernjungle.net

facebook.com/laselvanegra

stills, poster, director's statement:
themodernjungle.net/downloads

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North American Non-Theatrical Distribution

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THE MODERN JUNGLE

Synopsis

The Modern Jungle is a portrait of globalization filtered through the fever dream of a Mexican shaman, don Juan, who falls under the spell of a pyramid-scheme-marketed nutritional supplement. Juan's neighbor Carmen lives simply, in harmony with the land her martyred husband paid for with his life. THE MODERN JUNGLE documents their struggles and encounters with outside forces: from capitalism and commodity fetish, to the culture of cinema, and the directors of this film.

Logline

A story of globalization filtered through the fever dream of a Mexican shaman, THE MODERN JUNGLE is an intimate portrait of Zoque culture, commodity fetish, and the predicament of documentary.

from Visions du Réel

Carmen lives cheaply, but in peace, on the plot that her husband paid for with his life fighting for a landless farmers' movement. Juan, although a shaman, suffers from a hernia that his incantations cannot treat, and falls under the spell of charlatans who sell him nutritional supplements as medicine. This is 'the modern jungle' that appears before our unbelieving eyes. For, by paying their protagonists because they are "working" for their film, and by hiding nothing of this partly venal relationship, Fairbanks and Kak successfully dismiss, with a single filmic gesture, the myth — dear to a certain Western-centred ethnology — of the "pure" native, now placed under the permanent influence of Western acculturation.

Emmanuel Chicon



THE MODERN JUNGLE

Produced & Directed by Charles Fairbanks & Saul Kak

Camera & Edit Charles Fairbanks

Sound Recording Saul Kak

Zoque Translation Saul Kak

English Translation Charles Fairbanks

Original Music Hugo Paris (Lavender)
Lorenzo Rodríguez Estrada

Consulting Editor Jim Klein

Additional Sound Recording Bariza Benmehenni
Rosario Sotelo

Sound Mix Paul Hill

Featuring Juan Juárez Rodríguez
Carmen Echevarría Lopez

North American Digital & Educational Distribution Cinema Guild

Supported by The Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship
The MacDowell Colony
The Wexner Art Center's F/V Studio Program





DO YOU
KNOW
THE CAUSE
OF YOUR
PROBLEMS &
SUFFERING?

SELECT SCREENINGS:

Visions du Réel (Switzerland), **Morelia International Film Festival** (Mexico), **Slamdance** (USA), **Guanajuato International Film Festival** (Mexico), **WATCH:DOCS Human Rights in Film** (Poland), **Festival Cinéma Vérité** (Iran), **Ambulante** (Mexico), **Ann Arbor Film Festival** (USA), **Wexner Art Center** (USA), **IFF Boston** (USA), **Chicago Underground Film Festival** (USA), **DokuFest** (Kosovo), **Ânû-rû Âboro: Festival du Cinéma des Peuples** (New Caledonia), **Cine Las Américas** (USA), **Visible Evidence XXV** (USA), **Art of the Real** (USA)

JURY AWARD in the FEATURE DOCUMENTARY COMPETITION at SLAMDANCE

BEST DOCUMENTARY at PRESENCE AUTOCHTONE: Montreal's First Peoples Festival

JURY AWARD at the ATHENS INTERNATIONAL FILM & VIDEO FESTIVAL



GORGEOUS¹

A revelation that makes you wonder
about all the other documentaries you see.²

GREAT CINEMA³

A fascinating and self-aware examination of both cinematic and economic exploitation.
A film to see and ponder, for filmmakers and film lovers, alike.⁴

Fairbanks is candid about the figure of the documentary director as a perpetrator of capitalism
who nevertheless seeks to represent cultures caught up in faceless neoliberal regimes.⁵

REVEALING⁶

A moral quandary worth thinking about.³

FASCINATING⁷

A distillation of the modern documentary's interest in blurring the line
between not only fact and fiction but truth and performance.⁸

Kudos to Fairbanks and Kak
for making a film with a difference.⁶

MASTERFULLY SHOT AND FELT⁹

A powerful and engaging film.

If there was any justice, it would become a festival hit, accumulating viewers
lured by its intoxicating observations of modern jungle life, but swayed by its thorny politics.¹

SUPERB⁸

THE MODERN JUNGLE

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The Modern Jungle is a portrait of globalization filtered through the fever dream of its main character – a Mexican shaman, don Juan – who falls under the spell of a pyramid-scheme-marketed nutritional supplement. Juan's neighbor Carmen lives simply, in harmony with the land her martyred husband paid for with his life.

This film documents their struggles and encounters with outside forces: from capitalism and commodity fetish, to the culture of cinema, and the directors of this film.

Five years in the making, THE MODERN JUNGLE is an intimate document of two people and their Zoque culture, yet simultaneously a story about consumerism, modernity and monoculture. It was made through my deep collaboration with Juan, Carmen, and a young Zoque artist named Saul Kak. Our initial desire for this project was to depict Zoque culture in an honest yet dignified light. We also hoped to show the Zoque people's encounters with modernity and globalization. In this, the initial impulse for this project was fundamentally ethnographic.

But I didn't want to make a conventional ethnographic film. I wanted a film with teeth, a film that's honest, a film that moves

people. I wanted to show something real, but puncture viewers' comfortable sense of reality. I decided to blend fiction with documentary. While they lubricate the story, the fictions are relatively prosaic: the most incredible scenes in THE MODERN JUNGLE are also its purest examples of documentary.

To integrate their Zoque cosmovisión, or worldview, with the language and potential of cinema, we incorporate a dream sequence into this documentary. For the Zoque, dreams are significant and prophetic; they weigh upon one's life, actions, and existence. Some critics might insist that dreams are incompatible with documentary, but I contend that Juan's dream in the film manifests real fears, desires, and the psychological effects of the culture clash that is his life. Crucially, the significance of this dream is left open to interpretation – for the dreamer himself, and for viewers of the film.

THE MODERN JUNGLE is set in the region of *La Selva Negra* (literally, the black jungle), which is named after the thick fog that's so common there. As such, darkness and light, fog and obscurity are outsized forces in the world of the film. These motifs

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resonate with the candles used in Juan's ceremonies, the smoke and mirrors used to market *el producto*, and with cinema itself – and its light that penetrates darkness. In scenes that harken to Jean Rouch's seminal films *Jaguar* and *Chronicle of a Summer*, Juan and Carmen watch and comment on the very film in which they appear.

Here and elsewhere, THE MODERN JUNGLE is also about documentary. As it portrays cross-cultural encounters structured by and through the camera, our film doesn't shy away from the messy interpersonal, economic, and social repercussions of filming in impoverished communities. In *The Journalist and the Murderer*, Janet Malcolm describes how the author of nonfiction tends to represent himself differently than all other characters: "He forms the exception to the rule that nothing may be invented. The 'I' of journalism" [and, I contend, documentary]:

...is connected to the writer only in a tenuous way—the way, say, that Superman is connected to Clark Kent. The journalistic "I" is an overreliable narrator, a functionary to whom crucial tasks of narration and tone have been entrusted, an ad hoc creation, like the

chorus of Greek tragedy. He is an emblematic figure, an embodiment of the idea of the dispassionate observer of life. (160)

In contrast to this convention, I wanted to depict 'the documentary director' as a complex and flawed character, despite 'his' (that is, my) best intentions. Likewise, I wanted to show that making this film had real repercussions on the lives of its main characters. It became evident, while filming, that I too am an intruder, an outside force, a symptom of globalization in the world of Juan and Carmen. So, to make an honest film about their encounters with modernity, it seemed necessary to subvert this convention and address the ways we negotiate the power of representation.

Ultimately, we hope that by transgressing the conventions of documentary, viewers of THE MODERN JUNGLE will feel implicated, marked by the story because they're part of it too – even on the other side of the world.

- Charles Fairbanks



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Saul Kak is an artist, an activist, a speaker of Zoque and a member of this thousand-year-old culture. The first in his family to attend college, he's a graduate of UNICACH: the University of Science & Arts of Chiapas. Splitting his time between San Cristóbal de las Casas and his hometown in the Zoque region of Chiapas, Saul is part of the arts-collective EDELO, and a frequent collaborator with Galería MUY, a contemporary art center for indigenous art and artists from across Chiapas. Kak's paintings have exhibited widely across the Americas – from Brazil to Canada – and he's been commissioned to paint murals at art and cultural centers, and immigration relief organizations, across Chiapas, Oaxaca, and Tabasco. Furthermore, Kak writes poetry in Zoque, and in recent years he's been producing activist performance, video, and documentary, to focus attention on the plight, rights, and struggles of his people.

Charles Fairbanks grew up in Nebraska and wrestled at Stanford, where he studied Art and the History of Science. He has a MFA in Art & Design from the University of Michigan, where he also studied Anthropology and History. The founding professor of Media Arts at Antioch College in Ohio, Fairbanks has worked as a programmer and translator in Belgium, and taught *videoarte* and cel-phone videography in Mexico. His short films – including two on Mexican *lucha libre* – have shown on POV and at CPH:DOX, Images, Slamdance, Visions du Réel, and over 100 other festivals. For a retrospective screening in 2011, Anthology Film Archives wrote "His entertaining and heartfelt short films are extremely easy to enjoy and very hard to forget." He has received fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, MacDowell Colony, and the Wexner Art Center's Film/Video Studio Program. *The Modern Jungle* is his first feature.

