

# THE MODERN JUNGLE

a film by Charles Fairbanks & Saul Kak

**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. 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 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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