Development for Whom?

*This section explores the socio-economic implications of international trade and development, using the circumstances in Mwanza as an example of pervasive global patterns.*

QUESTION 1

The woman at the fish scrap mill says she prefers her current job to working on her farm upland, because at least here she makes a wage. Yet, despite the factory owner’s claim that no one would have jobs if it weren’t for the fishing industry, the film suggests that the perch boom in fact drew people away from stable livelihoods and created a situation of urban poverty and disease.

1. How do the woman’s favorable comments at the mill compare with your sense of what would be best for the people depicted in the film?
2. What might be the sources of any differences between your perspective and hers?

QUESTION 2

Social economist Eirik Jansen, who has done extensive research on the fishing industry in Eastern Africa, notes:

For every job created in the export industry, 6-8 jobs are being lost in the informal sector. It is particularly the many thousands of women that are small-scale traders and processors of fish that have lost their jobs… Many of the fishermen who in the past were “owner-operators” of their own fishing boats and equipment are now tied to the factories through credit relationships and thereby only receive a minimum price.[5]

1. How do Jansen’s research findings affect your understanding of both the factory owner’s claims and the fish scrap mill worker’s claims?
2. What do you think motivates their responses to the state of life in Mwanza?

QUESTION 4

In an informal interview, one of the pilots says, “Children in Angola receive weapons on Christmas day; European children receive grapes. That’s business! But I wish all children could receive grapes.”

In the broadest sense, what do you think the pilot means by “business”?

Ethics of Representation

*Questions in this section explore the good and bad, right and wrong—and in between—of how the filmmaker chooses to represent his subjects.*

QUESTION 1

Mount Kilimanjaro, the highest peak in Africa and a popular travel destination, lies along the northern border of Tanzania, about 400 miles from Mwanza by train. Serengeti National Park and Game Reserve, another popular destination, touches Lake Victoria along its northwestern border. There are also countless humanitarian organizations working in region and the country as a whole.

A. Why do you think the filmmaker chooses to omit these pieces of the larger picture?

B. What statement (if any) does omitting them make about the effects of tourism or humanitarian aid on the people he chronicles?

QUESTION 2

The film presents layered understandings of the reality of life on Lake Victoria, such that the picture presented at the beginning of the film is very different from the one that viewers are left with at the end. These filmic layers parallel the layers of understanding that different actors within the system hold about life in Tanzania.

A. At what points in the film did your understanding of those layers shift?

B. Where in the film do the understandings of one actor contradict those of another?

QUESTION 3

The renowned ethnographic filmmaker Jean Rouch once said of filmmaker Sauper’s work that it is “a cinema of contact.”

A. What effect do the interviews throughout the film have on your impression of the circumstances in Mwanza?

B. In particular, why do you think the pilots, whose cargo is illegal, let the filmmaker have such intimate access?

QUESTION 5

Though there are many interrelated forces at work in Mwanza, the filmmaker chooses to organize the film around resource extraction, as represented by the fishing industry.

A. What is the benefit of framing the film as a story about fish? What is lost by putting fish at the center of the narrative?

B. How would the story change if Sauper were to have used the cargo planes or HIV/AIDS as the central organizing principle of the film?

QUESTION 6

In an interview about the film, Sauper said, “Icould 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.”[1]

A. Whether or not you are familiar with the economic histories of the countries Sauper mentions, draw on your understanding of the circumstances surrounding the removal of fish in the film and consider what you would expect to find in Sierra Leone, Honduras, Libya, Nigeria or Angola.

B. While it’s true that there are similar patterns of exploitation and poverty throughout the Global South, do you agree that the same movie could be made anywhere? What is specific and unique and what is generalizable in this situation?

QUESTION 7

There is a limiting, but extremely pervasive, narrative about Africa, such that people often automatically associate the continent with AIDS, civil wars, extreme poverty, corrupt officials and so on.

A. How does the way Sauper tells this story contribute to or detract from this narrative?

B. How do you think this narrative affects citizens of African nations?

C. When describing a global issue or event, how does playing into the expected narrative affect your ability to understand and wrestle with the issue? What is the responsibility of a filmmaker to his or subjects when addressing an issue or a region fraught with stereotypes?

QUESTION 8

1. O. Scott, the *New York Times* film critic, reviewed “Darwin’s Nightmare” shortly after its theatrical release and called the film a “work of art”:

Given the gravity of Mr. Sauper’s subject, and the rigorous pessimism of his inquiry, it may seem a bit silly to compliment him for his eye. There are images here that have the terrifying sublimity of a painting by El Greco or Hieronymus Bosch: rows of huge, rotting fish heads sticking out of the ground; children turning garbage into makeshift toys. At other moments, you are struck by the natural loveliness of the lake and its surrounding hills, or by the handsome, high-cheekboned faces of many of the Tanzanians. The beauty, though, is not really beside the point; it is an integral part of the movie’s ethical vision, which in its tenderness and its angry sense of apocalypse seems to owe less to modern ideologies than to the prophetic rage of William Blake, who glimpsed heaven and hell at an earlier phase of capitalist development. Mr. Sauper’s movie is clearly aimed at the political conscience of Western audiences, and its implicit critique of some of our assumptions about the shape and direction of the global economy deserves to be taken seriously. But its reach extends far beyond questions of policy and political economy, and it turns the fugitive, mundane facts that are any docu­mentary’s raw materials into the stuff of tragedy and prophecy. [2]

A. Do you agree that this documentary is a work of art? What are the benefits of making an “artistic” film about this kind of subject rather than a more conventional documentary?

B. Scott says the film is aimed at the consciences of Western audiences. Do you agree? How does the film impact your conscience?

QUESTION 9

Scott is not the only reviewer to have made comparisons between Sauper’s work and other art, including the paintings of Bosch and Brueghel, the prose of William S. Burroughs and the poetry of William Blake. Consider the images and texts below and discuss:

Do you find the connections that Scott draws (see question 7 above) to these and other artists fitting? Why or why not? What other associations did the film inspire in your mind?

The Question Of Responsibility

*This section explores the moral quandaries of obligation and responsibility*

*that the film poses—both for those participating directly in the fishing industry*

*in Mwanza, and for us as viewers and consumers.*

QUESTION 1

Consider the following quotation from the filmmaker, which addresses the way the circumstances in Mwanza are connected to and maintained by many different actors both in and out of Tanzania:

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 Ato B carrying napalm), some don’t want to know, others simply fight for survival. Itried 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.[6]

1. Think about how each person—from the fishermen to factory owners to pilots to prostitutes to WTO representatives to consumers—is invested in the system. Why would they each want to maintain the status quo of the perch industry?
2. Who stands to benefit from the various effects of the perch industry? Who stands to lose?