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## The Modern Jungle

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## The Modern Jungle

### Abstract

This is a film review of *The Modern Jungle* (2017) directed by Charles Fairbanks and Saul Kak.

### Keywords

Indigenous cultures, Neo-colonialism

### Author Notes

John Lyden became Editor of the Journal of Religion & Film in 2011. He was Professor of Religion at Dana College from 1991-2010 and is now the Director of the Liberal Arts Core at Grand View University. He is the author of *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (NYU Press, 2003), and the editor of the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Film* (2009) and co-editor (with Eric Michael Mazur) of the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture* (2015). He was the 2008 recipient of the Spiritus Award for Outstanding Contributions to the study of Religion and Film.



***The Modern Jungle* (2017), dir. Charles Fairbanks and Saul Kak.**

This documentary film is an example of “direct cinema” that records its subjects performing ordinary everyday activities, and does not seek to impose an agenda or narrative structure on them. As such, the directors did not know exactly what would be created from their efforts. What was not anticipated was a relationship between the subjects and the filmmakers that they captured as it evolved.

Juan and Carmen were the locals who agreed to be filmed, even though they say that other people have criticized them for helping the “rich American filmmakers” who they assume will exploit them for money. The locals do not seem to understand the difference between a low budget documentary and a Hollywood blockbuster, and so automatically assume that money will be made from this film. Juan makes a little money as a healer, and he and Carmen both live simply off the land. Both are older and very poor. Both are religious, and pray to God for help with money and

health. Juan has a hernia and is frustrated with the inability of the city doctors to help him, a process catalogued by the film. He then asks the filmmakers for money to invest in nutritional supplements which he has seen advertised that promise tremendous health benefits. Although the filmmakers try to dissuade him from this path, telling him there is no guarantee these supplements will help, in the end they give him the money to purchase them. It appears that by investing in these products he is buying into a pyramid scheme according to which he is told he can earn tremendous profits by selling these to others. Juan, however, just wants to feel better, and believes that these “sacred products” will help him. He prays to God for healing through these, although there is no evidence that they will cure his hernia. The filmmaker even gets involved enough to suspiciously question the sellers of the products about their benefits before he purchases them, although this does not affect the sale.

This is an interesting example of documentary filmmakers becoming involved in the life of the subjects they film, and it shows that they are unable to do very much even when they want to make a difference. Those who view this film in the developed countries may also wonder what they can do for people like Carmen and Juan; perhaps it is just to hear and watch their story, and as they say at the end of the film, they know that they will “live on” through the magic of cinema.