



Visions du Réel International Film Festival, Nyon, Switzerland:

A Reality Check by Briana Berg

When questioned about the authenticity of his portraits, video artist Donigan Cumming answers, “It’s all just versions [of reality] to me in a way, and you work to the right version amongst the field of versions,” adding, “I kind of have a fluid relationship with reality anyway.” Visions du Réel might well be the only documentary festival in harmony with this viewpoint. Launched 33 years ago by ex-Berlinale director de Hadeln, the festival has undergone several changes. The 8th edition of its new format, Visions du Réel, took place April 22-28 in the little town of Nyon, Switzerland, on the shores of lake Geneva, a picture-perfect locale somewhat at odds with reel after reel of harsh realities.

On par with Cumming’s views, current director Jean Perret and his collaborators eliminated the word ‘documentary’ from the festival’s title. Visions du Réel, which can be translated as ‘states of reality’, focuses on the different ways to perceive and express reality. “It’s all subjective”, says International Relations spokeswoman Gabriela Bussmann about how editing enables different interpretations to surface. Thus Visions du Réel chooses to select non-fiction films with certain artistic and aesthetic qualities in mind, setting the festival apart from other documentary showcases. As a result, the audience is treated to traditional documentaries as well as experimental films, personal diaries or even the occasional dabbling in the realm of fiction.

Another particularity of the festival is its workshops, two matinee presentations by a couple of filmmakers, complete with Q&A, that allow real insight into the ‘how’ and with some luck, into the ‘why’ of their work. 2002 was the year of an unlikely Frederick Wiseman-Donigan Cumming American combo. At first glance, no two filmmakers in the non-fiction world could be further apart. The renowned Wiseman, whose first film, *Titicut Follies*, was banned for no less than 26 years, has been dealing in traditional documentary filmmaking for the last 30+ years, always seeking the least partisan presentation of his topics. On the other hand, Cumming, who was offered the first-ever complete retrospective of his work in Nyon, defines himself to a certain extent as a “social artist”, crafting involved, carefully rehearsed portraits of people on the fringe of society. Whereas Wiseman uses editing as the only expression of an otherwise interview- and narration-free exposé, Cumming intervenes, questions, even requests specific behaviors or dramatizations from his characters. Yet the individuals fighting against the government’s social system in Wiseman’s amazing *Welfare* are strangely similar to Colin, a quasi-homeless man ranting against society in Cumming’s *Erratic Angel*. Working with totally opposite methods and viewpoints, both men capture essential human reactions in such a way that the viewer is strongly drawn into their films.



Besides this didactic aspect, Visions du Réel, with its 112 films, 18 world-premieres and an international competition between Finnish, Japanese, Russian, Austrian and of course Swiss works to cite but a few, is first and foremost a showcase for recent non-fiction work from all around the globe. This year, several features dealt with current events from both individual and insider viewpoints. An arresting illustration of this is Avi Mograbi's *August, A moment Before the Eruption*, which is screening at New York's Human Rights Watch International Film Festival in June. The recipient of the Peace Film Prize at the 2002 Berlin's Film Festival, *August* offers a rare inside view of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with humor to boot. Interpreting himself, his wife and his producer thanks to the magic of split screen and digital montage, Mograbi alternates cynico-comic monologues on the making of his film with shots taken on the streets, scenes that one doesn't see very often. From soccer stadiums, political manifestations or the doctor's waiting room down to sidewalk arrests and even simple traffic control, *August* shows the anger and violence that always seem ready to erupt between Israeli citizens. He records Israeli and Palestinian comments and opinions, but also the constant meddling and badgering that he is submitted to by just about any passerby regarding what he should or should not be filming. A revealing documentary, *August* presents a different facet of Israel and illustrates in an almost premonitory way how explosive the situation was just a year ago. Awarded in Nyon's International Competition category, *The Eye of the Day* also shows elements of a country's psychology from an individual's standpoint. Through the daily tribulations of a sixty year-old woman and her two sons, Leonard Retel Helmrich paints a portrait of Indonesia during the 1998 civil upheavals -another one of the Human Rights Watch Festival's screenings. With an eye for both poetic and powerful images, the filmmaker shows the Indonesian people's everyday struggle for survival through fights for rice, the odd job, political protests, or prayer.

Two trends in filmmaking style stood out at Visions du Réel. The first trend are works in which the filmmakers devote as much attention to the artistic expression of the filmed material as they do to the topic itself. Films in that category include Andreas Horvath's striking *The Silence of Green*, which sets a conspiracy theory about England's 2001 epidemic of foot-and-mouth disease against a backdrop of religious fervor, scenes of animal slaughter and bucolic images. Another example of this orientation is personal favorite *Mothers of Life*, a tribute to human beings' resilience. In breathtaking cinematography, now in grainy black and white, now in washed-out color, Anastasia Lapsui and Markku Lehmuskallio document the life of a tribe of independent reindeer herders in Siberia called the Nenets, whose nomadic lifestyle is dying out. Filmed over a period of 10 years, their portrait of one family, dwindling down from the initial five members to two women by the time the new millennium comes along, ends up being as much about survival as it is about this ancient culture.



The second stylistic trend in Nyon was the atmospheric “journey film.” My preference here goes to Alexander Sokourov’s soulful *Elegy of a Voyage*. The great Russian filmmaker -a guest of Nyon’s workshop a few years back, now in competition at the Cannes International Film Festival with his latest fiction, *Russian Ark*- takes us on a journey of oneiric nature, fleeting images and poetic narrative. The voyage could be life, death, or a dream; it explores self, nature, religion and the life man has built for himself. Sokourov’s quest ends with painting: art as his answer, art perhaps as the fundamental expression of man’s spiritual essence. But in this category, the festival’s favorite was clearly Peter Mettler’s *Gambling, Gods and LSD*, winner of both the Grand Prize and the Young Audience Prize. *Gambling* was an uplifting, introspective quest for the spiritual nature of man. Traveling across North America, through Switzerland, and to India, Mettler tries to understand and document man’s search for meaning and rapture as expressed through religious ceremonies, drugs, gambling, but also raves, bungee jumping or electrically enhanced sexual props. Wrapped up in an attractive package with eye-catching images and stylistic effects, it brings us back to less materialistic values, questioning in user-friendly language who we are and what we are here for. *Gambling* may be naïve and perhaps a little hackneyed, and would certainly have benefited from an additional (and energetic) session in the cutting room, but the feature did achieve two things: great atmosphere and giving viewers the feeling that all men are connected despite their differences.

After a week full of terrorist conflict, welfare, homelessness and animal slaughter, an optimistic message about the unity of mankind was just what the audience in Nyon needed. All the same, the viewers kept coming back for more. Perhaps the daily parties, replete with free wine, free beer, free curry soup (go figure), and local Alphon music helped everyone get ready for the next day’s round of screenings. Or perhaps Donigan Cumming has a point when he says, “the art that functions best in the world we live in is aggressive.”

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