

A close-up photograph of a person's face, showing a surgical incision on the forehead. The skin is light-colored, and the incision is a dark, reddish-purple line. The person's eyes are partially visible on the left side of the frame.

Cruelty & Compassion

By MARCY GOLDBERG

DONIGAN CUMMING

**CONTROLLED
DISTURBANCE**

ÉTATS DES LIEUX – DONIGAN CUMMING

FESTIVAL VISIONS DU RÉEL 2002

CRUELTY & COMPASSION

PAR MARCY GOLDBERG

André Bazin once wrote that the ultimate realist film would be “composed of a single shot as long-lasting and as close-up as you like.” In his famous description of Erich von Stroheim's films he suggested how a true filmic interrogation of the real could look. “In his films reality lays itself bare like a suspect confessing under the relentless examination of the commissioner of police. He has one simple rule for direction. Take a close look at the world, keep on doing so, and in the end it will lay bare for you all its cruelty and ugliness.”

Today, over fifty years later, it is striking how well Bazin's description anticipates the work of Donigan Cumming in its evocation of long takes and a relentlessly close gaze in the service of encountering the real. Armed with a mini digital-video camera and a photographer's feel for rigorous framing, Cumming has brought the camera closer and kept it running longer than Bazin probably would have thought possible. But is the result necessarily the depiction of the ugly and the cruel? Cumming's films do reveal more than a passing acquaintance with Artaud's theatre of cruelty, as well as the absurd theatre of Ionesco and Beckett. And they are marked by a fascination with the traces of imperfection, aging, decline and decay. But to see only this side of his work is to miss its larger point, which is the co-existence of seeming opposites: cruelty and kindness, ugliness and beauty, suffering and redemption, authenticity and fiction. “Show the human tragedy, but also show the human love,” says Pierre, one of Cumming's regulars, in *After Brenda*. And that's what the film-maker does.

A fundamental characteristic of Cumming's films is that they constantly take us from one of these extremes to the other, often within the same scene. Perhaps the best example of this kind of emotional oscillation is the typical Cumming moment – found in so many of the films – where someone tries to sing a song or say a prayer. There are surprising discoveries: an epileptic and perhaps also retarded woman (Susan in *Cut the Parrot*) turns out to have a beautiful singing voice, or a sick and depressed old man (Marty in *My Dinner with Weegee*) gives an ironic rendition of a romantic love song. In a way these moments are empowering, as an ordinary or even marginal person temporarily becomes a star. But most of the time, the people are too drunk, sick or old to remember the words properly, and either trail off or start to repeat themselves. Cumming does not cut to another scene to save them – or us – from embarrassment; he keeps the camera running. The really distinctive thing about his method, however, is not that he holds the image long enough to make us uncomfortable about what we're seeing. It's that he keeps it going even longer, until something happens to make us wonder whether the whole thing was not just an act, anyway. Sometimes the person slips out of character, or comments on the performance. Often the clue is Cumming's off-screen voice: “That was good. Do it again.”

DONIGAN CUMMING, CONTROLLED DISTURBANCE

Cumming does not try to conceal his own role in the films he makes or the nature of his relationship with his subjects. He is their biographer and their stage director but he is also there to help: driving them to doctors' appointments, fetching medication, and giving advice. At times he deliberately provokes his subjects in order to get certain results, and this, alongside the indiscreet and unflattering close-ups, is what comes closest to what could be called cruelty. But the people he films are far from helpless, and they may criticize him in return; his verbal sparring sessions with his alter ego Colin (protagonist of *Erratic Angel* and *if only I*) are a recurring element in a number of films. Cumming has said that it is his intention to question “the myth of the innocent, invisible photographic witness.” Borrowing from what he calls “experimental ethnography” Cumming consciously positions himself not only as investigator but also participant, caretaker and friend. Thus his examinations of human frailty are always tempered by a compassion that stems from his own involvement in the situations he records. In his films, and in interviews and lectures, Cumming has hinted that one reason he feels drawn to the people he portrays is his feeling that they have simply been “less lucky” than he. His interactions with them necessarily raise the question: Why them and not me? It is safe to say that this is a question he would like the viewer to ask as well.