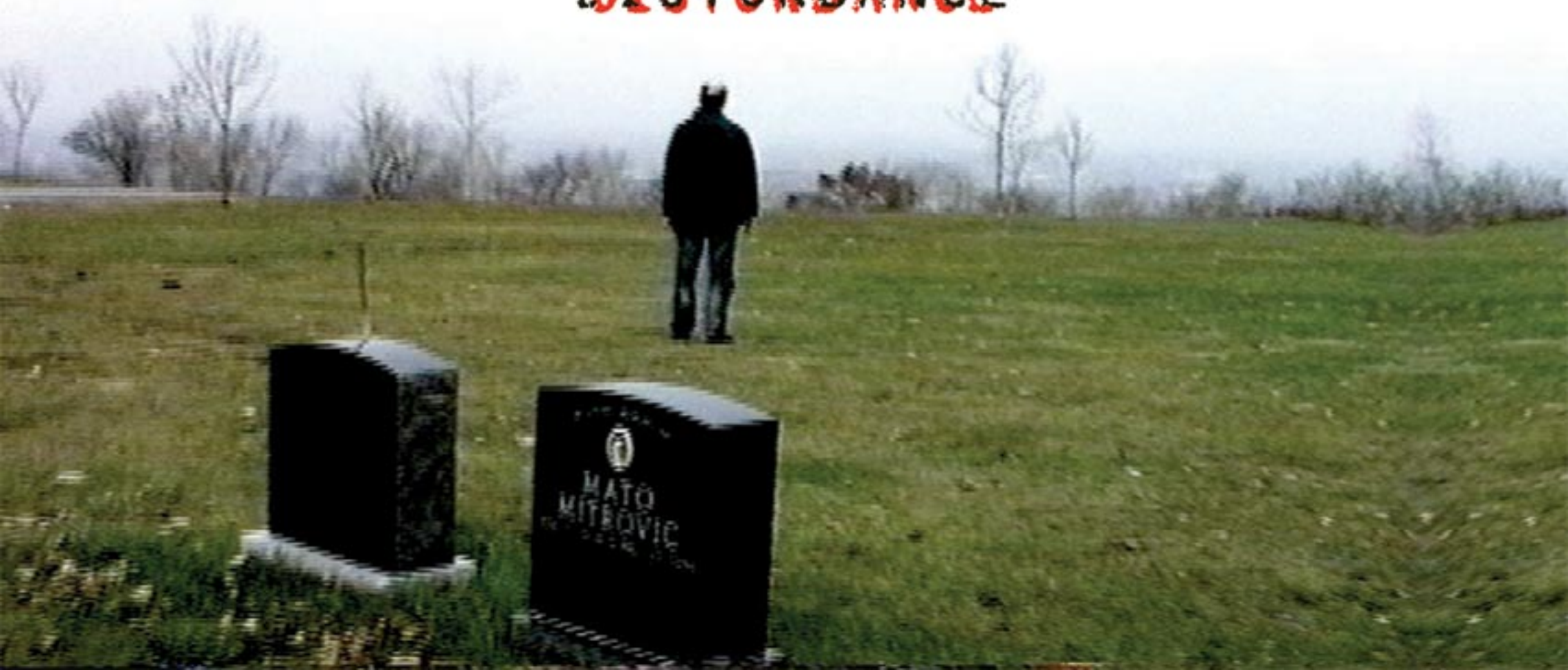


# *Cumming's Truths*

By JEAN PERRET

DONIGAN CUMMING

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## ÉTATS DES LIEUX – DONIGAN CUMMING

FESTIVAL VISIONS DU RÉEL 2002

### CUMMING'S TRUTHS

BY JEAN PERRET

*"In short, the work comments, often very critically, on the documentary tradition that feeds and houses it. Its overt artificiality and lack of orthodoxy are the first signs of rupture – fiction infiltrating the house of truth, and vice versa."*

*"I've been looking these people in the face for seventeen years and I intend to keep doing it."*

Donigan Cumming

Donigan Cumming makes it his business to collect the sounds, photographs and videographic sequences of people bruised or broken by life. But he is not the accredited ethnologist of this strata of society, asking himself agonizing questions as to the distance he should establish from them. Just the opposite, he crosses every threshold that common propriety normally insists on observing. Cumming fully accepts his influence in the spheres he explores. He goes into action with his characters, questions them, provokes them, sometimes makes use of them as if they were actors. He goes so far as to completely reveal his presence. His face alone forms the subject of one film (*Docu-Duster*), the sound of his footsteps and his breathing that of another (*Trip*). The film-maker is thus firmly present in his stories, he is an intimate partner in this little procession of people, his troupe as it were, composed of Nettie, Brenda, Colin, Albert, Nelson and Pierre...

It cannot be denied that Cumming's work at first sight provokes a strong distaste from which some people violently recoil. Are these portraits the result of an unhealthy voyeurism, guided by a perverted pleasure? What possible interest could there be in dwelling on these recipients of social security, living outside the generally accepted norms? Is Cumming a robber of pictures and painful truths, preying on people who are incapable of protecting themselves from the intrusion of the camera?

The truth of the matter is that the photographer and video director establishes with each of his characters a climate of confidence, and that he pays them for the work he does with them. He has known them, often for a long time, sees them regularly and seems to be always welcome in their homes. But on a deeper level, there is a common destiny that links Cumming to these people. In any case, this is what the video director suggests in *My Dinner with Weegee*: facing his own camera, he admits that, in the past, he was a victim of alcoholic dependency.

Donigan Cumming belongs to the great tradition of intimist and provocative realism. We are reminded of the American photography of Diane Arbus, Nan Goldin and Larry Clark, which explores the other side of familiar surroundings to capture simultaneously shafts of beauty and perfect yet monstrous banality.

Cumming's work lays emphasis on the technique of fixing his camera for long moments on his adoptive family. This gesture is political in that it attacks the audiovisual world in general and television in particular: both pretend not to cross the threshold of voyeurism whose limits they perversely push further back every day. The great obsessive fantasy of the media is that of proximity. Cumming is at the outpost of this ethical question, which he radically criticises. His stories are cathartic copies of airport novels, society magazines and «docu soaps»; they exacerbate their violence and ugliness to the limits of the absurd, exposing their cunning conceit, immobilizing their inanity.

A fundamental doubt runs through all Cumming's work. This is concerned with the people he films. Are they actually real people, or characters, non-professional actors, or models? How far can one believe in them? Are they really what the pictures reveal about them? Are they playing their own roles? Are we witnessing a carefully staged production? Or rehearsals? Are they showing us the result of a single take, or several? There is no definitive answer to these questions: the spectator is left to decide for himself. Cumming's work is certainly reminiscent of documentary works of fiction and social documentaries but it is sufficiently complex to satisfactorily defy such over-simplified definitions. To tell the truth, the film-maker develops his movements in a space unlike any other and which remains strictly enigmatic. The work of Donigan Cumming falls within the province of a primitive and lucid anthropology. His films are sometimes almost unbearable to watch. Humour is not absent, far from it. Subjects range from physical illness to mental disorders or old age; the film-maker never stops pursuing his themes in a highly personalized theatre where the scenes are those of the human condition stripped bare by death at work. This universe is perfectly contemporary. It disturbs and confirms our needs to go towards the Other in his hideous fragility and his brotherly grandeur.

*A dream. In the streets of Montreal, I see Cumming's characters, well dressed, well coiffed, clean shaven, looking calm and self-possessed. So normal. I go closer to make sure that it is really them, returned to normal life after the stories that disguised them. So that's it, I say to myself, they were playing roles like perfect actors. But they all turn away, evade my glance and disappear into the town. I shall never know.*