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An Irreducible Otherness



For Jean Perret, the festival director of Vision du Reel, creative documentary is really the beating heart of today's cinema. These films reflect the complexity of being alive now. And he stresses our openness to see the Other – without reducing the exotic, the special, or the unique. That which is different from me is one of the main questions in cinema. Especially today we also need cinema space to reconsider our lost or found utopias. But Perret reminds us that cinema is also an impure art.

By Emma Davie and Truls Lie

Words matter. When Jean Perret took over the festival in Nyon fifteen years ago, he dropped the word “documentary” from its name. “Visions du Reel” came into being with its recognition of looking as a profound act, born from that liminal space between dreaming and wakefulness: an act capable of revelation, of change. Images matter.

Filmmakers and viewers now swarm to the festival. Last year 28,000 made their way to this city in Switzerland. Here the audiences are relieved to find films reflecting the complexity of being alive now, films eschewing easy answers or formulaic storylines. Perret recognises the paradox of filming the real: as we go beyond the familiar and seek to communicate what we see or experience, we become more aware of the ineffable mystery at the heart of looking.

ED: *Why do you work as a festival director?*

– Because of tiny things – the emotions I get from watching films. A film can be very strong because of one moment of this emotion. I am looking for emotions like laughing, crying – all kinds of emotions. Another reason is the social and political: we have a responsibility in democracy to see these films and speak about them. This means to include the films and the people who sometimes live very far from us and our way of life, in our knowledge of ourselves. This is important, because we are completely invaded by the flow of audio-visual industrial production. More pictures mean less memory, and less memory means we are going to lose our roots, our identity, with these images flowing around us and ourselves with them, out into the endless landscape of nothing, of emptiness.

Thanks to these images, these stories and these visions we can improve our identities. We can understand who we are. But more important, we can understand how different others are. We are not really living in a global village: that is a fantasy. To say globalisation makes us all the same is a big lie. Such a lie is needed by the system in order to be as violent as it is.

We are a humble resistance, resisting with images. *Cinema du reel* is, of course, entertainment, but it's much more than that.

ED: *You have written that films of the real involve not so much reconciliation with the world, but a “deepening of its irreducible otherness and the beauty of that”. How does an elusive otherness find a voice in the films here?*

– Otherness, “l’alterite”, the Other, that which is different from me, is one of the main questions in cinema. Pornographic cinema – I don't just mean sex films – are films which try to be very near to the object, thinking nearness will see better. But *cinema du reel* is more the talent of each filmmaker to invent the right space or distance, to have a triangle. I am filming you at this distance so the spectator will have, as part of the triangle, a space in which to circulate, to think, to dream, to understand. The question is to be open-hearted, open-minded to what is not yourself.

Otherness exists because the filmmaker is inventing a specific space in which we can live together. But many films organise this space so they can fight the spectator, be aggressive to him, make him stupid, because they see the spectators as consumers, not citizens.

ED: *You see the viewer as somebody who can enter that space and understand the mystery of the Other, who won't try to reduce the other to one meaning?*

– Absolutely. As long as you're watching, you're taking the time to meet, to understand the depth of complexity. That's the beauty of the world – complexity.

This is a question of the director's ethics. One good example for me is *Survival Song* by Yu Guangyi. In this Chinese film, the main character, a poor worker, is fantastic because the Chinese filmmaker, in his perspective, gives him dignity. He considers this guy like him. He films him on his level. For me, this is a perfect film where this

guy, living in the North of China, is completely different from me. But the filmmaker is talented enough to give me the opportunity to approach him, to understand some aspects of his life, some aspects of the psychology of his feelings. I have been moved to tears by this film because it is just – living. The filmmaker has given me the opportunity just to pay attention, which creates respect and that is the basis of a relationship. The filmmaker is never judging anybody. It's never a news reportage about hard workers in the countryside in China. It is just stories.

TL: *Different from cultural theory which writes on behalf of the exotic Other, several documentarians make films about the freak, the exotic person, where the director's point of view is too dominating and reductive. Do you as a festival director pick local filmmakers*

“The Other, that which is different from me, is one of the main questions in cinema”



News wall, Visions du Reel

from abroad to avoid such reductivism of the Other?

– No, there are no rules. For example, we are showing a very different film by Stephan Breton. He is French. He was filming in New Mexico in southwest USA where he feels “alien”, but he kept a distance – which is fantastic for us to reflect in, and not judging them like monkeys. It is completely different from the Chinese film, which has the camera moving, looking, and searching. It's a completely different aesthetic.

TL: *In the film The Anger of Pasolini (reassembled in 2008), we see how Pasolini reflects through history about something that is lost in modern civilisation. Why is it important for you to bring this film to Nyon? It is actually 50 years old.*

– But the way it reflects inside the news is completely current. He's not speaking “on” the news and the archives, he is really speaking inside them. That's what is important. So many films are made “on”. In French we say “sur”. I don't like these films. The films we show are mostly made among people, with them, sometimes against them. It's possible to film with your enemy in the same field, not from the sky.

TL: *At the same time this film has a political content, as he is a Marxist. Do you see such political views as his from the sixties as being applicable today?*

– No. It's not possible any more, even though we miss Pasolini. It would be great to have him back, especially now, to know what he thinks – but we have lost ideological roots now. We don't know exactly where we are going. We know we have a need to reflect and that's why *Encirclement* by Richard Brouillette [see article on the previous page] is so strong for me. It's a very long film, with twelve or thirteen people speaking about neoliberalism. You are not bored for one second. You discover the complexity of these values and this system. You think this system we are living in is not working. So what can we do? At least you get some tools with which you can disagree with the common values we are living in.

ED: *Kowlaski said something interesting as he was presenting his web-based work Camera War 6 here. He said that under the current financial crisis there is nothing physical to film, that the powers governing the world cannot be captured on film. How do we find images for this elusive problem that affects us all?*

– Have you seen the film *I Love Dollars* by Johan van der Keuken? He comes to Geneva to film private banking. It's impossible and he shows that, filming walls, buildings. He gets into an office with a beautiful wooden table with a guy who says nothing. He shows us that it's not possible to film capitalism working. That's very interesting. I am more and more interested in the question of the body in films...

It's a response to daily images where you see thousands of bodies and you hear thousands of voices – but with no roots. They are perfect phantoms. Of course, in every film, everybody becomes a phantom, but I think to acknowledge the Other is to experience his being in the world, where he is living, what this being really means for me. I am a very physical person. I need to touch the place and people where I am living. From these films I expect to experience the specific weight of people. There are filmmakers filming somebody walking and you feel this walk. The fantastic film by Robert Kramer has this title *Walk the Walk*. I believe deeply in that. I am expecting from films to feel how people are walking their walk. So many films do not have this dimension – people are just not alive in the film.

TL: *Let's talk about the consequences of a documentary. Alan Resnais once wrote that if you watch a documentary you feel exhausted and that's the only duty you have. A fictional film has a different “effect” on you a long time afterwards. Do some documentaries really change things in people, or for the Other's situation?*

– It's a basic, important question, but also a painful one. For instance, we showed this Indian film *Bilal* by Sourav Sarangi, about a family with a blind mother, a father with two little children. It's a very touching



Survival Song, (2008) Yu Guangyi



story and, of course, I would like to help this family to have better conditions for their daily life. So I think something will or has to change with our consciousness. But it is so difficult to have a direct impact on the situations, like you are mentioning.

TL: *When people in the west become voyeurs, look and feel, but then just let them be in their Otherness, it doesn't help, does it?*

– For instance is *Bilal* only possible for me, because it's made by an Indian man, because of its specific ethical points of view?

At the same time we cannot be naïve any more like we have been. The beginning is to improve the memory, the consciousness of where we are living. After seeing *Encirclement*, I am disturbed enough to understand the system we are living in with more detail. It is a tricky system. We are in a deep crisis, but if you look around and read the newspapers they want to reenact the system. Nothing will basically change. They just want to heal the wounded points. That's all. It could be a fantastic opportunity really to ask questions, to change some values we are living in.

TL: *Actually there have been practically no articles in the newspapers discussing the economic system.*

Do you think we will see it in coming documentaries?

– I hope so. *Encirclement* is a good example, but documentaries need a little time of reflection. We see more and more documentaries searching, asking unconventional, disturbing questions. Political cinema wants to know what is really going on. Cinema no longer says that tomorrow we need a socialist revolution. That was the time of Pasolini.

ED: *Is a part of that the creation of a space for an audience to empower themselves?*

– Absolutely.

TL: *– You have been talking about different trends like the "I" cinema, autobiographical and biographical films. Here in Nyon, Susan Mogul shows her autobiographical works. Aren't these the types of films that don't see the Other, but focus more on one's self, making one blind to Otherness?*

– No. It's part of the field of cinema. With *Mogul*, for instance, these narcissistic films, I think, are part of creation. I like novels where people are reflecting about themselves, I like diaries. Why not?

ED: *Maybe it is about the Other too. Her films say so much about Los Angeles, and she too is a document, in a sense.*

– She is. I like to feel the taste of authenticity – these are Vision du Reel films. More and more documentaries, especially in America, want to tell a story – and the storytelling system becomes more important than the raw material. Many times they edit against what they really have got, because the storytelling structure becomes more important.

– I believe that cinema is an impure art. It's made out of many influences: the history of painting; of architecture; of music; of drawings; of literature; and a little bit like opera. I believe in hybrid compositions. I believe in influences between the fiction tradition and documentary tradition, because the fiction tradition helps many documentaries tell a story: how to have main characters, conceive a dramaturgy – and more fictions today know they need the taste of documentary.

I believe in the moment of cinema. What is the moment in cinema? It is a piece of time I can believe in, because cinema is made to laugh, to cry, to dream and to sleep.

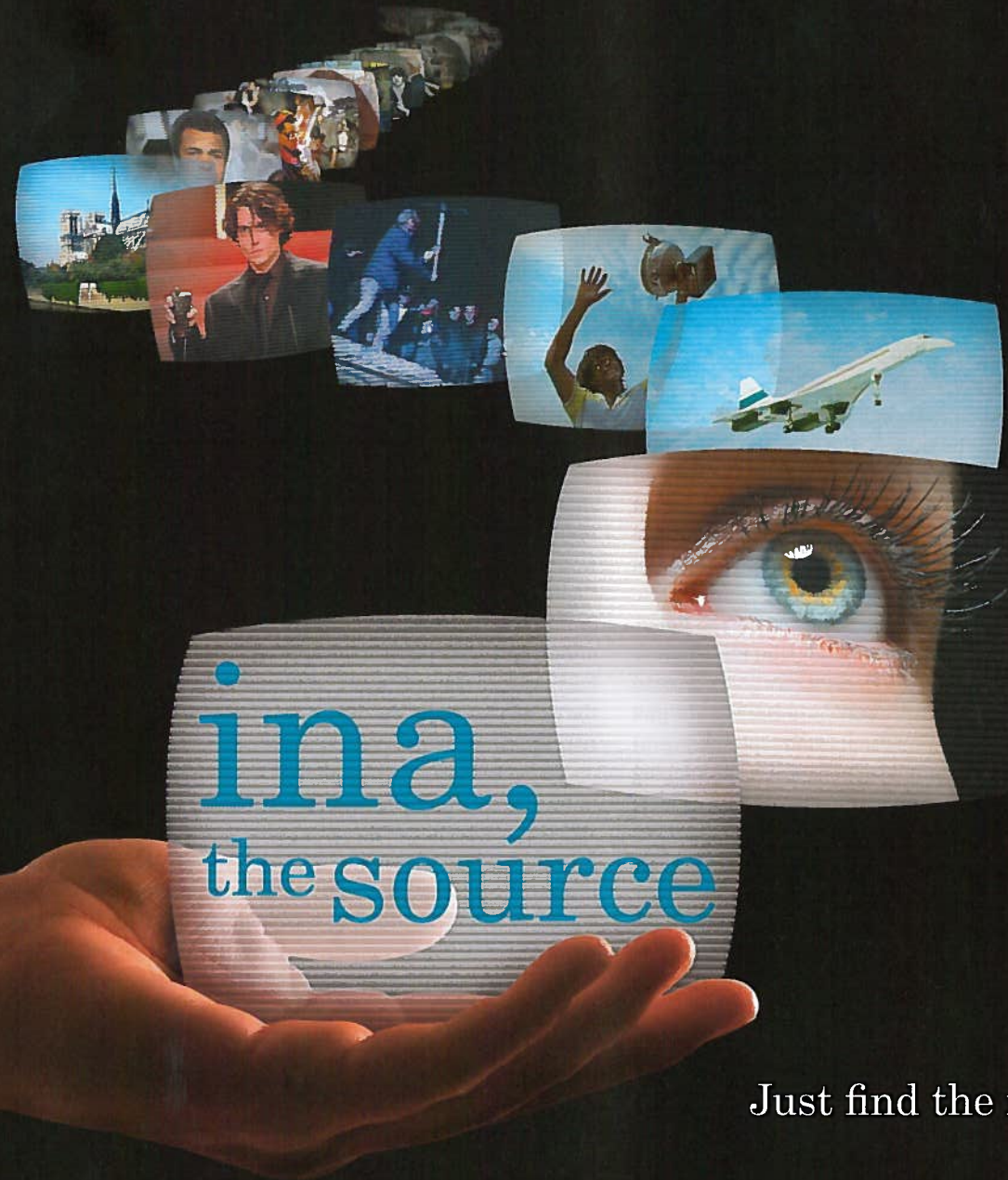
ED: *Why sleep?*

– Because of dreaming. You can be in a theatre watching a film, sleep a little bit, and then come back to the film. Cinema has to do with something different than just watching with your eyes. It takes you into another space. I believe in cinema as an element we need for reconsidering our utopias. We've lost our utopias. I believe deeply that cinema du reel, creative documentary, is really the beating heart of today's cinema, cinema as a whole. It's the beating heart of creation of the seventh art, i.e., the art of cinema. ▣

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