

Curatorial essay accompanying the Cinema Lounge: Alison Davis on Peter Mettler's Gambling, Gods and LSD program screened at the Winnipeg Film Group's Cinematheque on July 11, 2012

Peter Mettler describes his three hour experimental documentary *Gambling, Gods and LSD* as an inquiry into transcendence and a film that “invites the viewer to actively participate in the making of meaning, so that the central theme of the film and the experience of watching it become one and the same.” He approaches the film as a journey, a series of short sequences that ideally will coalesce into a meaningful experience for the viewer. The film acts as an experimental response to the questions “Is it possible, to construct and transmit the experience of transcendence in a film? Is it possible by looking closely, by recording particular events, by asking subjects probing questions, by then assembling the right series of scenes in the right order, to package transcendence and pass it on to a viewer?”

Art often aims to be transcendent, striving to act as a catalyst to allow the viewer to surpass her normal perceptions of the world. In this sense Mettler’s goal of making a work that takes the viewer beyond direct perception does not seem overly ambitious. He is only endeavoring to do the same thing that many other artists attempt. But it is the fact that he pursues the question so directly, where the subject of the film attempts to mirror its content that makes the film unique.

At the same time Mettler seems aware that this is an undertaking that can never quite succeed. He is limited by his existing notions of the profound. The film necessarily only includes experiences he encounters which are then selected and edited. The goal is also limited by the medium. Filmmaking can do a lot of things but it can’t directly translate a person’s thoughts or feelings, nor can it be the same as “being there”. As his camera surveys the desert Mettler asks, “...how do I show you what I can’t see?” He goes about trying to demonstrate an answer to this question in an eclectic but deliberate way.

The film although genuinely surprising and unpredictable does follow a certain structure. It takes place chronologically beginning in Mettler’s hometown of Toronto, moving to Las Vegas, then on to Mettler’s second home of Switzerland and lastly to Southern India. As he travels to each location it seems that he finds only scraps of meaning and so he moves on to the next place. He ends up, as many Westerners do when their search for transcendence in the context of their own culture has not been satisfactory, in Southern India seeking meaning in the unfamiliar.

In addition to his search for transcendence, Mettler also sought in each location: denial of death, illusion of safety, and relationship to nature. He creates odd juxtapositions of footage that move from vast landscapes, to graffiti on city sidewalks, to interviews of acquaintances. He often focuses his camera on those elements that are all around us but frequently go unseen, the airplane passing overhead, an empty cubicle farm in an office building in India, the top floor of an abandoned hotel. But why focus on what are fairly mundane surroundings when creating a film about the search for meaning? One would think that in order to pursue such a philosophical question that you might go to holy places and seek out people who claim to have the answers. If this were a typical documentary perhaps the director would interview Buddhist monks not electro-stimulation salesmen; he would visit Jerusalem not Las Vegas. What good though is transcendence if it is not attainable in accessible surroundings? Most people do not live holy or particularly contemplative lives, our sense of the profound generally doesn't come from spending decades meditating; we find it in day-to-day life by stopping on occasion to see what is important about what is in front of us.

Similarly, Mettler does not interview individuals that one would think of as being enlightened. Instead, he seeks out individuals with a variety of life experiences - former addicts, a scientist studying mitochondrial DNA, a woman who claims to have seen Jesus, a man grieving the death of his wife - and asks them each the same series of questions, (although the questions themselves have often been edited out of the film). He asks these various people: "Have you ever had to go to war?", "Have you found what you're looking for?", "Do you know love?", "Do you know silence?" and "Is there anything you're afraid of?" The kind of maddening questions that I imagine would often elicit vague, non-committal responses. Mettler's subjects however appear to really consider his questions and try to answer them honestly. The interviewees' genuineness allows the film to avoid the danger of pretension. These people are not caricatures and are given the time and platform to say what they really feel.

A few of the people he speaks to describe experiences with drugs. One former heroin addict says "What smack gave me was a kind of inner peace something you'd probably have to work at for years... maybe by means of mediation or whatever to reach that state of... warmth." In other words he felt that with drugs he'd found a shortcut to transcendent experience. Mettler is also seeking a shortcut, though instead of using drugs Mettler uses the filmmaking process.

In each location we also see people having intense collective experiences. In Toronto Mettler visits an evangelical gathering in a convention hall on the airport strip. Many of the attendees lie on the floor "slain in the spirit" as it is put by a man at the beginning of the film. In Las Vegas his camera inspects the faces of a crowd awaiting the demolition of The Aladdin Hotel, everyone excited by the spectacle of controlled destruction. In Switzerland we are taken to a street party where young people lose themselves in the physicality of dance. Lastly, in Southern India we see throngs of people awaiting their turn to be hugged by Amma "the hugging saint", hoping to find a certain

connection in her touch. What is important, the film suggests, is not the nature of the collective experience but simply the act of coming together with other people for the same purpose. The cinema going experience itself operates as the last collective event of this film.

Throughout the whole film the soundtrack maintains a, sometimes calming, sometimes ominous, background drone. It is never joyful, never desperate, just constant, like a chant or the noise of a crowd. Just as the mood of the soundtrack stays the same Mettler so does the pace of editing. Mettler never places more emphasis on one scene than another. His treatment of all the elements of this film seem to say, "everything is equally meaningful." In an interview in 2002 with Cinemascope, Mettler comments on the shooting of the project: "... I slowly had the feeling that everything I looked at contained the things I had seen before. It didn't matter what I looked at anymore; wherever I looked, whatever I had been looking for could be found." He implies that one can find transcendence while watching tv or while staring into a waterfall or while visiting a temple. While talking to a Bollywood actress on a film set in Switzerland the actress told him that where she comes from, they say there is no difference between God and a stone. The implication being that God is in everything, that nothing, no matter how small, lacks significance. But it can also mean the opposite. All of the scenes of the film only take on the meaning that we assign to them based on our own background. As Albert Hoffman, the inventor of LSD, says during an interview that plays on a television set in Mettler's studio, "Every person basically creates the entire world for themselves." I think that despite Mettler's stated goal we, as viewers, do not make meaning as we watch *Gambling, Gods and LSD*. We have our pre-existing conceptions of transcendence reflected back to us. We see meaning in the parts of the film that correspond to what we already feel to be true and find the rest interesting or ridiculous.

Gambling, Gods & LSD does not present an argument, provide information or paint a portrait as many documentaries do. Nor does it succeed, at least for me, in transmitting transcendence. Instead what it does, and does well, is present an arrangement of unexpected scenes, and varied reflections while leaving enough space during contemplative moments for me experience my own thoughts. It is in those spaces that an exceptional film emerges.

Background on Alison Davis:

Born in Pinawa, Manitoba and raised in Deep River, Ontario Alison Davis spent most of her childhood playing in the woods. She graduated with a BFA in Film Animation in 2004 from Concordia University, in Montreal. After her graduation she moved back to Winnipeg where she still lives and draws her traditionally animated films. Her animated films have played at festivals around the world. She is also the head projectionist at the Winnipeg Film Group's Cinematheque.