

## Golden Gate Persistence of Vision Award (2007)

### Heddy Honigmann Is Good for You

By John Anderson

At this year's Academy Awards, an incongruous Jerry Seinfeld introduced the nominees in the Best Documentary Feature category by calling them "the five extremely depressing films that are nominated for this award." Not the most agile joke, perhaps, but a lot of documentary people probably laughed out loud, as did any viewers with a sense of film history, and any sense of humor. They knew the line actually mocked what has come to be a profoundly passé stereotype: Nonfiction cinema may be good for you, but it is about as appetizing as medicine.

Heddy Honigmann is good for you. And her films are appetizing antidepressants. Penguins, fast food and fat guys in baseball caps all have been credited with raising the profile of the documentary in recent years, but these are aberrations, stupid pet tricks at the symphony. Among the real artists of nonfiction, Heddy is as responsible as anyone for raising the standards of doc-making worldwide. She flexes the form to meet her purposes, but never sacrifices style or integrity. She champions the dispossessed without sermonizing, and she injects just enough of herself in her films to give us a sense of the woman behind the movie without ever eclipsing the subject or the substance, the sense of space or the sense of place.

That her films are egoless makes them all the more precious.

This also means that Heddy may never win an Oscar, or even be nominated for one. But let's face it: She exists on a stratum too rarified for celebrity-driven industry awards or klieg-lit TV spectacles. It is up to the likes of the San Francisco Film Society, and its Golden Gate Persistence of Vision Award, to honor the lifetime achievement of a woman who has taken us inside the hearts of subjects most other filmmakers would never have noticed.

Most other filmmakers, of course, would never have been capable of the delicately probing methods and sometimes heart-wrenching effects she's achieved. Consider *Crazy*, her 2001 film about U.N. soldiers who reminisce about hellish global conflicts and the music they listened to in order to stay sane. The film is a tightrope walk across an open wound—the lingering camera, the obvious pain and the vortex of memory create more tension than a week's worth of action thrillers—but neither the subjects nor their inquisitor ever lose their dignity. Or our attention.

In *The Underground Orchestra*, music again plays a central theme—as it often does in Heddy's films—but rather than being just a means of creative expression, it is the unifying element among immigrant street people of Paris, and the avenue by which Honigmann gets into her real themes of exile, inequality, disenfranchisement and personal histories. "I don't make films about subjects," she told an interviewer in 2001, "but about people." A simple, elegant, generous ethic, yet one that seems to elude about half the documentarians currently in circulation.

Born in Lima, Peru in 1951, Heddy trained as a filmmaker in Rome and has lived and worked in the Netherlands since 1978. It is said that love brought her to Amsterdam, and love has been the engine of her art—especially if one considers art a form of love. Heddy isn't particularly interested in railing against social inequities, despite the sense of political dissatisfaction one hears rumbling under her movies like a dyspeptic subway train. Rather, she is obsessed with the way people of often limited means deal with those inequities—through art, through love, through sex. Through memory. Through dance: For the expat Cubans who virtually oscillate through *Dame la Mano*, movement and music are a means of reconnection to community, culture and Havana. In this case it

is the rumba—albeit a rumba performed in New Jersey—that provides the oblique arrow with which Honigmann pierces her target.

“Through the personal stories you get to the other backgrounds, the beauty, the power” she has said. “If you did it the other way round, a film would be too heavy, it would be unbearable.” Via circuitous routes, Honigmann knows, we often arrive at truth.

But is truth enough for her? Are there gradations of truth? Degrees? Qualities? It is true that atrocities were committed in Bosnia during the war, but there is another truth achieved in *Good Husband, Dear Son*, in which Honigmann wades into Ahatovici to capture the grieving female voice of a town where 80 percent of the men are gone. It’s true that Peru suffered economic collapse in the ’90s, but there’s another truth in the individual stories of the teachers, economists and housewives of *Metal and Melancholy* who turned into taxi drivers to make ends meet. And while it’s true that we live in a culture of celebrity, death and celebrity death, the way Honigmann treats these matters in *Forever* is unlikely ever to be matched in tenderness, wit or ironic contemplation.

Heddy’s films are elegantly composed, rich in precisely poetic imagery, fluid transitions and narrative flow. Ultimately, though, what one comes away feeling is the humanity, the empathy, the pouring out of hearts. Ask any theologian: What separates man from other animals? The same thing that distinguishes the work of Heddy Honigmann: Soul.

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