



Home Movie,
dir. John Price (2010)

Report from Rotterdam: Canadian shorts and the simplicity of history

CANADIAN SHORTS that made it to Rotterdam's prestigious international film festival addressed reality in very different ways.

Home Movie by John Price is shot on 'matured' 35mm film stock. It shows dreamlike images of his family and home in the most extraordinary colours. We hear children at play, babbling, and a cat purring. From time to time, the ominous outside world seeps in through the soundtrack, as we hear newscasts of deaths, accidents and industrial sounds of factories.

Price includes fast-motion techniques and contrasts the scenes of life inside the house and of the playground with the world outside of childhood, such as a building site. Without using any commentary, voice-over or titles, Price lets his images speak for themselves.

The effect of the matured stock is wonderful. The colours of the images and the effects of spots and other 'damage' give a specific atmosphere, reminiscent of images from the '50s. The content of the images themselves remains somewhat distant and is overshadowed by their colours and visual texture. The film is more about material than representation.

Tao Gu's beautiful *On the Way to the Sea* was shot in black and white. The film reflects on how the 2008 earthquake affected Gu's hometown, Wenchuan, China. We hear first-person accounts of survivors and see ruins as well as shots of everyday life before the catastrophe: a cat, a child cycling.

There is no further commentary, but Gu combines adapted and reworked images and photographs with the sounds of rattling, squeaking, cracking, screaming. He creates an atmosphere of chaos, disruption and disquiet. Because of the way they are reworked, some of the images convey a sense of the beauty of evil as well.

Apparently, Gu's parents survived the quake, but we don't get any information on whether it is them we hear or see in a photomontage, going through the ruins. The disaster, the loss and the astonishment at such events become universal.

Emanuel Licha's *Mirages* is a much more conventional doc in images and sound, but doubles—if not triples—reality in content. In a deserted and dry landscape, we enter Baghdad, Calif. It's one of the mock villages at the Fort Irwin National Training Center for the U.S. Army, preparing soldiers for missions for other dry and sandy places, like Iraq. But, of course, there are no real Iraqis or Afghans or Taliban to fight here.

So what do you do in California? You hire actors, set dressers, acting coaches, make-up artists and pyrotechnic artists, and let them create the battlefield, as realistically as possible. The Iraqi actors—or, rather, role players—have to interact with the soldiers "in the most culturally correct way." There are posters of Al-Sadr, and even goats are brought in.

Texts explain what is going on here in more



More on the films can be found on their websites:

Home Movie: www.filmdiary.org

On the Way to the Sea:
www.greengroundproductions.com

Mirages:
www.emmanuel-lich.com/mirages

The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceausescu:
www.the-autobiography.com

general terms. The interviewees are seated on a chair in medium shots. A voice-over tells their name and function and sometimes their age. It makes one think of an audition or casting session. We look around the village: people are moving about, there is the call to prayer, there are exercises, explosions etc. A couple watching and commenting on the events from a window literally see the theatre of operation. Tourists are invited to watch the spectacle. Journalists are also invited to come and film from the observation desk, or stay in the mock hotel room. There they might practise their reporting.

At the end of the film, the last actor tells us about his talent for entertaining and we hear a tourist guide explain the place. It is all entertainment, just like Hollywood. This film is about reality, of course, but how many realities are we witnessing here? The

mock village for training, the created village with its inhabitants, the tourists' village, the filmmaker's village.

The matured material in *Home Movie* problematizes the reality of the photographic image. It no longer reflects material reality with its distorted colours. The same goes for *On the Way to the Sea*. In addition, some of the reworked images in this film relate to emotion rather than to (convey-

ing an) experience. *Mirage* questions "reality" at a number of levels.

While the Canadian shorts express the complexity of our relationship to reality, Andrei Ujica's new compilation film *The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceausescu* reduces the reality of Romania's recent past to a single person, the former dictator himself.



The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceausescu, dir. Andrei Ujica (2010)

Based on material Ujica found in the Romanian film and TV archives, we witness a presumably chronological account of Ceausescu's reign, starting in the mid-'60s after the demise of Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, then leader of the nation, up to the 1989 revolution and the mock trial at which Ceausescu and his wife, Elena, were condemned to death.

After a brief introduction with images of the 1989 trial, we detect a young Ceausescu among other party members at the funeral of Gheorghiu-Dej. The future dictator's hair is still black; he looks shy and timid. Not exactly a statesman yet, even though he delivers a commemoration speech. One of the first things we see him do is change the name of the Romanian Workers' Party to the Romanian Communist Party. A new constitution follows. There is a sense of hope, a new beginning: the images convey a sense of spontaneity; there is dance and song and music. Ceausescu wanted to follow an independent road for his country and in 1968, he publicly condemned the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia.

There are, of course, the countless meetings with foreign colleagues and comrades, either abroad or in Romania: Leonid Brezhnev, Kim Il Sung, Mao Zedong, Richard Nixon. We also see Ceausescu among many we do not know: party members, officials, ordinary citizens, at parties and receptions.

Slowly we see Ceausescu becoming the dictator as we remember him, with Elena at his side, demanding a more prominent position for herself as time passes. Near the end there is a last meeting with Mikhail Gorbachev. Contrary to most other meetings with various comrades, the atmosphere is ice cold. This is the beginning of the end. East Germany's Erich Honecker must have been his last guest, visiting shortly before Communism was declared dead. He descends the airplane stairs and the two greet each other as friends. Two old men at the end of their era.

Without any commentary, additional information (there is not even a title at the beginning of the film) or additional sounds (some parts of the film are silent), we witness Ceausescu's career. We are not told who all these people we see are and it does not really matter.

But why then is this so fascinating to watch? First, because Ceausescu is fascinating to watch. With his small stature, his funny curly hair and crooked mouth, he never looked a statesman, in my eyes. And because what we see is History: It's a past era. It's over. We are watching in retrospect, with a distance, knowing who some of these people were and what they stood for. But most of all, because we are watching a tragedy. The downfall of the 'hero' is inescapable, and we know it. **POV**

Willemien Sanders is an affiliated researcher at the Research Institute for History and Culture at Utrecht University, the Netherlands. Her PhD project is about documentary filmmaking and ethics. willemiens.wordpress.com