

POV

POINT OF VIEW



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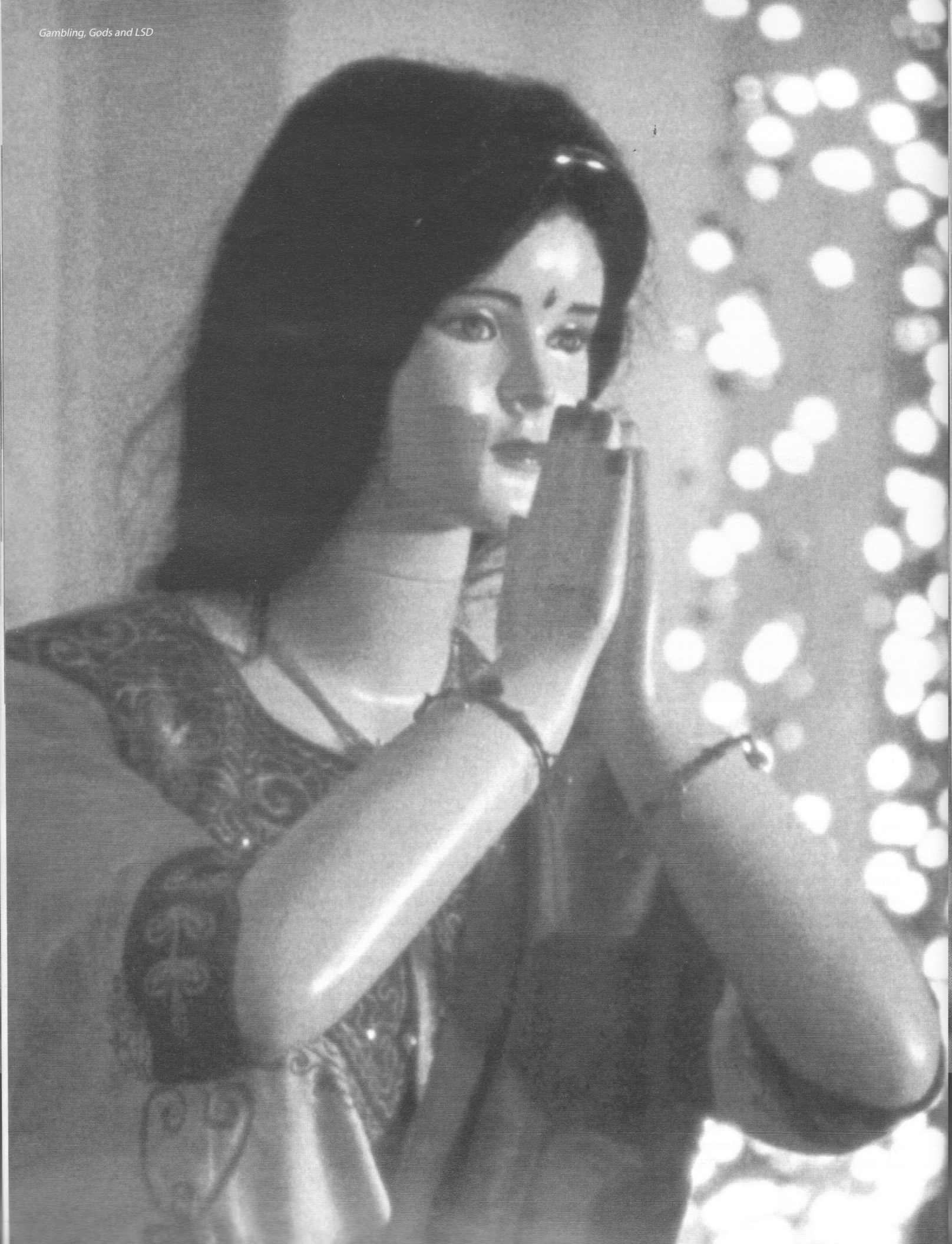
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crisis, what crisis?

indie filmmaking on the brink

gambling, gods and lsd + clint star remembered + privatization of memory + and much more



the quest for transcendence:

gambling, gods and lsd

by Jack Blum

MY SISTER TELLS A STORY ABOUT ALICE, an elderly woman whose mental illness makes her hostile, untrusting, and unable to take pleasure in any aspect of her existence. In a life reduced to very little activity at all, her favourite pastime is fretfully staring at her watch, or trying to, since her vision has deteriorated as well.

My sister (whose name is Lilly) describes a visit during which the entire conversation consisted of exchanges like the following:

Alice: What time is it?
Lilly: 1:12 pm.
Alice: Are you sure? It's broken. It's not moving.
Lilly: Your watch works fine.
Alice: It's 12:15
Lilly: No, it's 1:15. See, the small hand is between the 1 and the 2.
Alice: What time is it now? Is it 1:16?
Lilly: Yes.

And so it continued with Alice staring at the watch, claiming it was broken, or asking again what time it was. And then:

Alice: What time is it?
Lilly: It's 1:30 now.
Alice: Ahhh... now's the hard part.

What did she mean, 'the hard part'? There was nothing happening at 2 pm; Alice was not waiting for anything. Pressed for an explanation, Alice finally came clean: now the minute hand had to

climb the left side of the dial all the way to the top. The uphill part of the journey.

"Now's the hard part." The line haunted my sister until she finally came to understand that, even in a life as reduced as Alice's, there was a need for narrative, that narrative gave the movement of the watch's hands a meaning in which Alice was urgently invested.

Peter Mettler's new film, *Gambling, Gods and LSD*, is, among many other things, an exercise in perceived narrative: a string of associations that forces the viewer to find his or her own meaning in the journey. And to the extent that the film itself is about that very basic human need — to find meaning, to construct narrative — it is a perfect marriage of form and content.

I've always appreciated Mettler's work — the visual brilliance and the free, fearless imagination — and I've always been glad he was around, doing his thing. But I, myself, come from the theatre, and a more narrative-based background. I like to be told a story. So I've never considered myself, for lack of a better expression, part of Mettler's 'target audience'.

At the same time, I've encountered people who felt the same way about my own work as a filmmaker. For whatever reason, what I did "wasn't their cup of tea." Of course, I always told myself there was something wrong with them: they were closed-minded or obtuse, or otherwise unworthy of appreciating my gifts. Why didn't they just make the effort to see what was there and rise above their preconceptions and prejudices? Why, indeed. Why didn't I do the same?

So I decided to approach the film entirely on its own terms, whatever those may be. For pretty close to three hours I wandered from Toronto to Las Vegas to Switzerland to India, floating through the questions, the provocations, the indelible images, the wordless



Gambling, Gods and LSD

stretches of landscape, the footage of unexplained rituals, the testimony of people whose pursuits encompass a vast range of endeavour.

I was richly rewarded for my efforts. For although it is not Mettler's way to tell a conventional story, he manages to weave a fascinating tapestry out of wildly diverse threads of human existence. It is precisely the great scope of the journey that gives it its resonance, as slowly a feeling is engendered in the viewer of belonging to this wacky race of creatures, which itself, in turn, belongs to Nature as a whole.

***Fish gotta swim
Birds gotta fly,
Man gotta sit and wonder
Why, why, why***

A journey can be anything, any traversing of distance, literal or figurative: Point A to Point B to Point C. One does not need a destination to be on a journey, nor even an overriding motive — simple restlessness is enough to overcome inertia and once you're moving, inertia is often enough to keep you on your way. A quest, on the other hand, is a journey with narrative. There is a goal, a driving reason that determines each step, each choice. There is a causal relation between each part.

A human life is a journey, the beginning and end of which are predetermined and immutable. We move from birth to death without the tiniest ability to change either. Many of us find this annoying. We spend large amounts of time and effort trying to create a narrative for our lives, trying to give this brief sojourn meaning. These life-narratives are varied concoctions made up of large and small subplots: our childhood experiences as well as the histories of our

extended family, our religion, and many other larger entities with which we may identify — culture, ethnicity, nationality, astrology, to name just a few. We use the narratives we create to justify past behaviour and make our plans for the future. If we get really carried away, we start to think in terms of 'destiny,' thereby connecting our little cake crumb of time on the planet to the vast purposes of the universe.

In *Gambling, Gods and LSD*, the quest is for transcendence. Over and over we are shown people striving to break free of the prison of their own existence. As one might imagine, religion gets a certain amount of airplay, but so do much more obscure and/or arcane pursuits.

There's a guy in Vegas, for example, who has devoted his life to the study of erotic electro-stimulation, a discipline, we are given to understand, of his own devising. In simple language, we're talking about sex with machines. We see an attractive young woman dressed up in tight red vinyl (could be leather, I suppose) as she is strapped into the 'PES auto-erotic chair', and electrode-bearing phal-luses are brought almost to the point of entry. Double entry, actually. While she waits for her 'session' to begin, she talks about the passions of her life — cooking pasta and talking to her parents.

Explanations are sparse in this piece and that which is presented tends to spark far more questions than answers. Nonetheless, our Nevada entrepreneur-inventor speaks with a calm clarity about what he's up to, namely, "amplifying sexual response in the human anatomy...mapping neurologically the sexual response and then looking at the various amplitudes and frequencies to amplify the sexual response." (The sign above his desk reads: "P.E.S. Bringing human sexuality into the twenty-first century.")

Watching this, I find my mind racing to apprehend what I'm being presented with. Of course, it's loopy, but we are, after all, in Vegas: nothing is too much of a surprise. But what does it mean?

As far as transcendence is concerned, I think people have always given sex pretty high marks. I mean, here we are, trapped in our own little sacks of skin and suddenly there's someone else involved, a penetration both literal and figurative, a merging and — most of the time at least — an exquisite loss of consciousness, resolving into a massive sense of well-being. It's physical, certainly, but also spiritual in the sense that it is shared with another. The walls are broken down and for a brief instant we have a bit of a laugh; even if we're mostly alone, we're not entirely alone.

So the first question is: "Do we need the human sexual response to be amplified?" As it is, it don't seem so bad, and there's always drugs if you're looking for that something extra (more on that one later). And secondly, if it's with a machine, is it sex at all? Even if a machine can amplify the bells and whistles, are we not sacrificing the very point of sex in the first place, namely to get off with someone else?

Mettler does not pose these questions as an interviewer. Instead, he probes the inventor on subjects that are disarmingly human: "Do you know what silence is?" "Yes." "Do you know what love is?" "Yes." "What are you afraid of?" "Me. The more I get to know myself, my mind, the more in many aspects I fear it. Because we should. We possess a tremendous amount of power." The man is terribly vulnerable as he says these words; there is no question he feels these things deeply.

And with this, the image dissolves into one that speaks to what has preceded it with the elegance and grace of poetry, while never letting us forget the absurd religion of escapism of which Las Vegas is the mecca: a couple — a bride and groom to all appearances — do a double bungee jump from some appropriately tall structure. Bound together at the ankles, they hold onto one another for dear life — literally, figuratively — and bounce and dangle at the end of their elastic tether. At once both sublime and absurd, it is a perfect punctuation mark to all that is rolling around in the viewers mind: cyber-sex, fear of the human mind, the attempt to escape the bonds of nature through technology, the need to hold onto something for dear life.

For those like myself who get itchy in the middle of a three-hour film about existence, wanting something to happen, these images (there are dozens of them) surprise and distract me the way one distracts a cranky baby with big funny noise or facial expression. Then, before you know it, Mettler has moved on and I'm in another country, another world, another angle on the question.

Which is not to say that the film doesn't demand a certain amount of patience, as well as the active participation of the viewer. There are sequences comprised of nothing but landscapes. Water, in particular, is a central motif, and the director/narrator suggests that he is "following water everywhere" and, by giving himself to this flow, is allowing the film to construct itself. Power lines and transformers, airplanes, mechanical figures, clouds — all these return again and again, woven in and around the longer interview sequences. For the interviews, Mettler rarely keeps the camera on the speaking subject, panning away to take in a nearby soccer game or dog races, or cutting away to another context altogether.

Not all of these images fit obviously or easily into an overall scheme, though I have no doubt that Mettler could explain it all quite clearly and at length. He just chooses not to, and this can occasionally be frustrating.

For example, again and again, Mettler comes back to images of people in groups — religious gatherings, rituals, raves, festivals. We

are never given any details or explanations. Who are these people? What religion are they practicing?

Sometimes, the filmmaker uses our curiosity beautifully. In Las Vegas, he pans across hundreds of Americans dressed in the same blue poncho, waving and chattering in anticipation and excitement. It could easily be a religious gathering of some sort, but it turns out instead to be a different kind of spectacle: one of the older hotel casinos is about to be demolished. So our own expectations are turned back on themselves, and I find myself wondering if perhaps this strange scene isn't in some way a religious gathering after all.

Other sequences are less satisfying and just leave me scratching my head. From a document sent by one of the film's producers — excerpts from a 'Making Of' journal kept by the filmmaker — I learn that Mettler "entered a town where 3 policemen had just been shot. A massive manhunt bringing in the army, SWAT teams, native trackers, dogs, media and all. I have a radio scanner and can hear the conversations of many of the locals, couples, loved ones, gun freaks, Navaho and so on, as well as the police themselves." I remember this sequence in the film, particularly because of the intricate sound mix that shuffles the audio fragments mentioned above. But I would not know, even on repeated viewings, that three policemen had just been shot, nor did I really understand what the sequence was meant to give me in the context of the whole.

Another factoid from the journal: "At the [Toronto] airport, I visit a church that attracts people from around the world because apparently God was manifest there a couple of years ago. The manifestation took the form of mass hysteria, laughing, and convulsions. Ever since, people have come to this church to 'catch the fire' and take it back to their home countries and churches." This is utterly fascinating, but again, you wouldn't know about it just from watching the film.

The sequence at the church by the airport is one of the film's most rivetting. We watch hundreds, possibly thousands, of people work themselves into a strange religious ecstasy. There is the usual shouting and testifying, and also dancing to music provided by a really good rock band that can only be described as amazingly kick-ass. People lie on the floor, in some kind of transcendent state, muttering, singing, laughing, their limbs held aloft or jerking around randomly. Some young men roll on the floor, convulsed with laughter, tears streaming down their faces.

Do I really need to know the history of this particular church? Perhaps without these details, a deeper commonality emerges. In the event, I end up making my own strong association with what I'm seeing: I keep thinking these worshippers are indistinguishable from people I've seen stoned out of their mind on acid.

This connection is not lost on Mettler, who also introduces us to several addicts and former addicts, not to mention Albert Hoffman, the chemist who is credited with inventing LSD. It is clear that intoxicants, hallucinogens, and narcotics have been helping humans to help themselves to another state of perception since well before Jesus was a boy scout.

And just what is that 'other state'? One of the ex-addicts talks about smack giving him "a kind of inner peace" such as would otherwise have taken "years of meditation." This is in stark contrast to his description of eight months in solitary confinement, an account that resonates with the much larger issue. If we are all so desperate for transcendence, what is it exactly we are trying to transcend? Are we all, on some deep level, serving a life sentence in solitary confinement, with no time off for good behaviour?

Ultimately, of course, it is our sense of aloneness that plagues us and pushes us to try to escape the tiny prison cell of our lives. In the film, two roads begin to emerge as, in common Yahoo parlance, 'most popular searches': there's the 'buzz', as pursued through drugs, cyber-sex, gambling — a heightening of sensation that temporarily washes away the loneliness ("we are pleasure-seeking machines," observes the cyber-sex inventor) and there is 'inner peace', a sense of belonging to the vastness of God or nature or the universe. At times the lines between these two paths are blurred. Is the throng of ecstatic worshippers really that different in kind from the throng of ecstatic ravers, bouncing wildly to techno-funk while being covered in waves of soap suds (another of those arresting Mettler images)?

Furthermore, the 'inner peace' solution has proponents in both the religious/spiritual world and the ostensibly hard-nosed 'rational' world of science. From both we hear the proposition that the world that we perceive is by definition a product of our imagination. Albert Hoffman, inventor of LSD: "[The material world] is where all signals originate. They pass through our antennae — eyes, ears, touch, smell — and...are transformed into experience — sight sound music. Every person basically creates the world for themselves." An unnamed religious leader in India: "Now, supposing you see a rope on your way. It is twilight, not full darkness, not full light, so when you see, you see it like a serpent... So you get [scared] ... Then a friend comes and says, 'Hey, this is only a rope.' Then what happens?... There was no serpent at all; it was an imagination of your mind. Similarly, whatever we see, all these are imaginations ... There is nothing else. There is no world."

By the time we are listening to this second colloquy, quite late in the film, there is a sense of a circle closing. We've travelled all this way — from North America to Switzerland to India — and the chemist and the holy man are telling us the same thing, wrestling with the same dilemma in the same terms. The theme of cycles, of return, comes up often. The filmmaker often refers to his own sense of going back to the world he knew as a child. And Hoffman himself describes the LSD state as being similar to certain experiences he had as a child which he believes are more or less universal: "They were moments that every human being has experienced, typically in childhood...when you are still emotionally open to the world and approach things not with your intellect but with open senses. You experience nature feeling that you are a part of it ... an

indescribable feeling of happiness." (Alright, I have done acid and it does feel like that, but as far as I'm concerned it has nothing to do with anything in my childhood).

I can't say Mettler's film left me with an indescribable feeling of happiness. But there were certainly moments when I realized that I'd fallen into the film as though through the looking-glass, where I was lost in a particular image or sequence, full of curiosity but also strangely beyond it. Not "looking for something," as Mettler narrates, but rather "a part of what you're looking at." It's that feeling a part of something that seems the only balm for this lonely existence. And it slowly begins to dawn on me that my own sense of yearning for narrative, for thrust, for cause and continuity, is exactly the feeling that Mettler's on-camera interviewees are confronting.

Thus, the film begins to speak to me very directly, through its own formal construction. The issue of "How do I deal with this longing?" resolves into "Hmm, seems like everyone is dealing with this longing." An answer that forms within the question, and co-exists with it. Nothing is resolved, but there is comfort nonetheless.

As I was writing this piece, the doorbell rang and I opened it to find two young men, no older than twenty, in white shirts and ties, wanting to talk to me about the Mormon Church. As is my well-practiced habit, I told them I was busy and closed the door, but suddenly changed my mind, switching the tracks of my own narrative much in the manner of Mettler, and following what the universe was placing before me.

I stepped outside onto my porch and told the two that I would like to speak with them. They were stunned, of course, by my willingness, let alone actual enthusiasm, and it took the slightly older one (Elder Purdie said his badge) several minutes to grasp the fact that he had a fish on the line. He asked me questions about myself, my beliefs, my feelings about religion. I tried to be thoughtful, but kept the answers brief, preferring to find out their views on the same subjects. I was not unfamiliar with the basic gist of his approach: "God loves mankind and has a truth for us and it has been revealed through the teachings of the prophets. If we do certain things we can return to Him, which is what he wants for us..."

There was no need to challenge him on any of the dubious aspects of the Mormon Church specifically, or organized religion in general. In fact, I had no conscious purpose other than simply being open to the encounter. (I didn't ask the question that was most in

HOW IT WAS DONE

In these days when 'marketplace considerations' are increasingly determining what kind of movies get made, both here and around the world, it is something of a wonder that such a film as *Gambling, Gods and LSD* exists at all. Unfortunately, like the film itself, the producers are somewhat circumspect when it comes to the nuts and bolts of how it got made. For example, they would not disclose the budget.

I am not without sympathy for this position. When your distributors are out trying to sell the film, they'd rather their prospective buyers not know how much it cost for fear of prejudicing the sale price. Still, given that the film was ten years in the making and involved shooting in Canada, the US, Switzerland, and India, one has to wonder whether the filmmaker is: a) independently wealthy; b) quite mad; or c) (bless him), both.

Whatever the total budget, it was cobbled together with money from Switzerland and Canada, as well as a significant European television pre-sale that includes France, Germany, Spain, Poland, Belgium, and Switzerland. According to producer Ingrid Venninger, almost 50% of the budget came from Switzerland in the form of private investment ("in the style of patrons") and some Swiss grants for which Mettler was eligible due to his dual citizenship. The Canadian piece (about 20%) was comprised of a grant from the Canada Council Millennium Fund, some Telefilm investment, and a distribution advance from Odeon Films. The television pre-sale accounts for the remainder.

After roughly four years of travel, research, and writing, Mettler shot the film over a period of almost three years, beginning in October of 1997. Post-production took another two and a half years.

— J.B.

the forefront of my mind throughout the conversation: "Come on, don't you ever blink?" I swear he never did).

They left me with a copy of the Book of Mormon (complete with lovely childlike illustrations), having taken me through a very basic narrative of the history of the Latter Day Saints. According to their Gospel, two tribes left Jerusalem around 600 BC, crossed the Atlantic and settled in the upper half of the South American continent, eventually founding great civilizations (and becoming the principal ancestors of the American Indian). Shortly after the Crucifixion and Resurrection, Christ Himself turned up in what is now Bolivia or Peru and had an extensive 'personal ministry' among these nations. His words, as well as those of a number of other prophets, were set down on a series of gold plates, which eventually came to be buried in a hill in upstate New York, their existence subsequently revealed to Joseph Smith in the early 19th century. As I have said, there is no meaning without narrative and I have to admit their's is a colourful one, but no more or less so than those told by most of the world's religions.

Furthermore, Elder Purdie and Peterson would have seemed quite at home in *Gambling, Gods and LSD*, two sincere people whose belief in this story gave their lives shape, purpose and meaning.

Mettler's film does not subscribe to easy answers, any more than it provides the viewer with an easy narrative 'ride'. But the restlessness and discontent of the filmmaker as traveller mirrors the searching, yearning quality of life on this earth, and the yearning itself becomes a bond of commonality, paradoxically providing the comfort of belonging: if we're all wondering what it's all about, then doesn't that become a token of membership in the human club? If we're all unique and original individuals, then aren't we also all the same? Each of us a part of this thronging, dancing, questioning, worshipping species? And perhaps that is the only comfort we can take.

POV

Jack Blum is a veteran TV writer (Traders, Once A Thief) and filmmaker.

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