



The unravelling of satellite-dish salesman Gus Victor (Stephen Ouimette)

REALM OF THE SENSES

Toronto director Peter Mettler turns his exploration of life into a stunning audio-visual experience

BY MARTIN SIBEROK

Canadian filmmakers seem fascinated by electronic communication. David Cronenberg gave us interactive video in *Videodrome* long before it came into vogue. Atom Egoyan populated his films with video monitors to emphasize the distance in human relationships. Now Peter Mettler uses satellite imagery as a metaphor of human existence.

Respected in Toronto's independent filmmaking community as a cinematographer, Mettler is best known for his work with Atom Egoyan, Bruce McDonald, and Patricia Rozema. *The Top of His Head*, his ambitious and complex first feature, travels the uncharted avenues of the human mind, and skillfully projects a person's inner turmoil and transformation onto the screen.

Mettler goes further than most of his colleagues in grappling with cinema as an exploratory process. Concerned with the workings of creation, he took three years to write the script and more than one year of post-production work to finish *The Top of His Head*. It's a film made to be watched frame by frame.

"I was attentive to detail to an obsessive degree," Mettler confides. "I often thought near the end of editing that I can't go on working like this. I was so obsessive in linking details and concepts, which many people won't even notice. But I couldn't stop."

"For me, filmmaking is a sculptural process. You keep adding layers and taking away things, and you are never sure of the end result until you get there."

A non-verbal filmmaker, Mettler's *auteur* approach differs radically from the Hollywood-dictated linear narratives most audi-

ences are accustomed to. As a preface, he uses a quote by the 18th-century German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: "We talk far too much. I personally should like to renounce speech altogether and communicate everything I have to say in sketches."

"I found the quote in Aldous Huxley's *The Doors of Perception*," says Mettler. "I thought it was very appropriate, especially from someone who was such a master of language, to make such a realization that words are only one level of consciousness."

The Top of His Head centres around the unravelling of an ordered and rational man as he plunges into an unknown world of emotion and intuition. By the end, he is in touch with his senses, and discovers the detail of his environment.

The successful satellite-dish salesman Gus Victor (played superbly by Stephen Ouimette) is on the verge of breaking new records. He can rattle off a well-rehearsed sales pitch with marbles in his mouth. Despite his success at selling these high-tech instruments of communication, he fails to fully comprehend their power and meaning.

His affair with Lucy, a mysterious young performance artist and animal-rights activist (Christie MacFadyen), triggers Gus' imagination and opens up the closed doors of his perception. When he first meets Lucy on an isolated lakeshore beach, she is doing "nothing in particular." Asked how one does that, she answers, "You take the things you normally do, and don't do them."

Her unpredictability is unnerving, and starts to slowly erode Gus' confidence. Then one day, she

suddenly disappears. The only clue to her whereabouts is a riddle she left for him to solve. Like a medieval quest, Gus follows the indicated signs in a journey of self-discovery, driven by such questions as, "If the world is to everyone what each one sees, then what is its definition?"

The Top of His Head's sound is simply stunning. The attention paid to audio detail is something few films can match. The atmospheric soundtrack by avant-garde composer Fred Frith further complements this landscape of multi-layered noise.

"We spent five weeks in Montreal working at the NFB," says Mettler. "We lived in the same apartment, played pool, and hung out together. It's certainly a creative way of working."

"Most musicians see the film's fine-cut, but Fred worked with it in its rough-cut stage. But the end, the music had an effect on how the film was cut. The two simply fed of each other."

The Top of His Head is not an easy movie, nor are the questions it posits. Like most hallucinatory explorations, it stimulates and perplexes as it delves into the realm beyond the rational. The experience can be disorientating, as the familiar becomes alien and the unknown clearer.

"When people come out of the film, I hope they are more in tune to seeing detail, and more inclined to see through generalizations about life," says Mettler. "I hope it helps them open up their minds and senses, so they can bypass the intellect and tap into the intuitive."

The Top of His Head at the Paris Cinema