

There's beauty buzzing around *The Top of His Head*

Wednesday, Peter Mettler was in Bali. Today he's in Switzerland. Tomorrow he flies to Montreal. "Third World culture shock" is how he describes his slightly spaced condition over the phone line from Zurich.

That figures. The Toronto filmmaker's first feature, *The Top of His Head*, which opens at the Paris Cinema today, has a certain spaced quality itself.

In one of the more visually ravishing cinematic rides of recent years, Mettler's avant-garde movie intercuts miles-high shots of the earth from the Interplanetary Satellite System with tight close-ups of forest moss, leaf-lined ponds and mushrooms. A full moon shines through power lines, brush grows up around cars in a junk yard, a giant earth mover rumbles past an old barn. And what's that in the cardboard box? A dead swan?

These are fragments from a film full of radical, haunting imagery. A film where rationale and linear narrative move to the back of the bus, where image and intuition take the wheel.

That also figures.

Images are Mettler's speciality. First and foremost, he's a cinematographer, the man behind Atom Egoyan's (*Family Viewing*) supercool look and a veteran of independent movies by Bruce (*Roadkill*) McDonald and Kay Armatage.



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REEL LIFE

The buzz surrounding *The Top of His Head* since it hit the festival circuit last year has focused on its astonishing, terrible beauty. Talk has also made much of its skewed time sense, wild mix of video, 35mm and super 16mm, and baffling, baffled road-movie plot. One for the Difficult file, is how the cinema cadre defined Mettler's drama.

"There's something a bit schizophrenic about the film," Mettler admits. "It looks like a story film, but it's not quite a story film. It looks like an experimental film, but it's not quite an experimental film. People don't know how to read it, how to grasp it. They appreciate the quality of the film, but can't figure out what's going on."

"What I consider the centre of *The Top of His Head* is the dynamic between intuition and intellect. Everything in the

film divides that line somehow — whether it's the story, which I consider part of the intellect, set against images and sounds, which pick up on a more ritual, intuitive level." Right.

In fact, anyone raised with McLuhan and their finger on the remote button of the family satellite TV dish can figure out what's going down at *The Top of His Head*.

A crackerjack, poly-blend salesman named Gus Victor (Stephen Ouimette) — sells satellite dishes as a matter of fact — meets an alluring, mysterious woman named Lucy (Christie MacFadyen) on the beach, under the high-tension pylons. He's an ambitious, bottom-line jerk; she's a revolutionary performance artist on the lam from people who may or may not be the police.

The next two weeks witness the collapse of Gus's safe material world, and his search for new meaning as he's drawn deeper into a strange new life where even the most mundane objects — spiders on dashboards, moving trains, a map of Indonesia traced in rust on the rocker panels of Gus's borrowed Karmann Ghia — have their own real value.

These, and many more, images filtered through the heightened awareness of Mettler's camera make *The Top of His Head* worth the trip; make it worth the five years and \$1.5 million he poured into the project.



Peter Mettler Images are his speciality