

IN SEARCH OF WONDER:
PETER METTLER'S
**Gambling,
Goods
and LSD**

BY Stephen Lan

If you're looking for answers, you've come to the wrong place. It's taken Peter Mettler almost 10 years to make his three-hour epic, *Gambling, Gods and LSD (GGLSD)*, and he's not about to just lay all of his cards down on the table and get into detailed musings about the significance of his latest oeuvre. One would have better luck asking him about the meaning of life. While such gentle reticence may be misconstrued by some, Mettler is, in fact, doing something admirable: allowing his audience to think for themselves, sadly, something that so few filmmakers these days take into consideration.

Instead of spoon-feeding straight answers from a silver platter, *GGLSD* keeps its narrative moving forward by continually prodding the viewer with implicit questions. The most recurring and insistent one perhaps being: What is this film about? Rather than act as a detraction, the film's deliberate elusiveness is precisely what makes it boldly unique. Nothing in *GGLSD* is deliberately obvious. Nor is anything said explicitly or explained à la lettre. Consequently, the film becomes a visual and aural enigma for the viewer to elucidate; and in the process, Mettler's journey becomes as much ours as it is his. Furthermore, because *GGLSD* demands more from us in terms of attention, participation and interpretation, our relationship with it develops more naturally and more intimately. This is precisely the beauty of Mettler's filmmaking; the process of watching is more crucial than what is actually being seen.

In very broad terms, *GGLSD* can be considered a travel diary, a record of Mettler's simultaneously observational and introspective journey across the globe from late 1997 to early 1999. The film is structured into four, long, distinctive vignettes, each one corresponding to Mettler's major pit stops: starting in his hometown Toronto, going through Monument Valley and Las Vegas in southwestern USA, stopping by Zurich and the Helvetian Glacier in Switzerland, and finally ending up in the Vijayanagara Empire and in Bombay in southern India. Faithful to its title, *GGLSD* contains segments depicting rows of gamblers pulling at slot machines, a gathering of Christians screaming out to Jesus while convulsing on the floor of an airport hangar, and Albert Hofmann appearing in a television interview about his radical discovery of LSD in the early 1940s. But whether meant deliberately or not, the film's title is a bit misleading. While the film does indeed address the joys of compulsive betting, spirituality through various forms of adoration and pleasure-providing forms of illicit substances, *GGLSD* is about all and yet at the same time none of the above.

GGLSD isn't a narrative and yet is structured as a story, with a beginning, a middle and an end. It isn't a documentary and yet records in cinéma-vérité style a myriad of experiences of real people from different parts of the world. It isn't a personal diary and yet exposes intimate recollections of Mettler's own childhood memories. Nor is it an experimental film and yet uses abstract imagery and frequently resorts to associational form to convey a particular message or to encompass a broader theme. Strictly speaking, *GGLSD* doesn't fit any of these categories. More accurately, perhaps, the film can be considered a synthesis of all of these different sub-genres of the non-narrative form.

Not one to be confined to a specific genre, Mettler has always been reticent about being slapped with the documentary filmmaker or experimental filmmaker labels; such enforced cate-

gorization would only imply that his films function in a certain way or adhere to strict rules of a given form: "*Gambling, Gods and LSD* is in part about the breaking down of categories or prejudices," the filmmaker explains. "It invites the viewer to go on a journey, to actively participate in the making of meaning and the opening of senses."

Those familiar with Mettler's body of work will recognize this inclination to transcend categories. From his first feature film, *Scissere*—which incidentally thrust him into the spotlight in 1982 when the film was snagged by what was then known as the Toronto Festival of Festivals—to his more recent *Picture of Light* (1994), Mettler has always been drawn to the meticulous art of blending abstract images, narrative stories, sound and music collages into a single cohesive piece. Looking back at some of his other films, particularly the travelogue *Eastern Avenue* (1985) and the diary/performance piece *Balifilm* (1997), it seems as if they (while certainly self-contained films in their own rights) acted as models or notes for *GGLSD*. "I belong to the school that believes that a filmmaker is always making the same film," Mettler explains. "There is a certain tone to one's perception, affecting visual style and rhythms, certain themes that inform one's character and interests. These seem to repeat themselves in a spiraling fashion—spiraling as opposed to circling because they are always evolving and embracing new experiences, new contexts."

The original idea for *GGLSD* came about in 1988, germinating in Mettler's mind only as three simple words: gambling, gods, LSD. But it wasn't until *Picture of Light* was completed in 1994 that the filmmaker was able to devote himself entirely to his new project. From the beginning, the process of making the film was structured as a voyage of discovery. For the most part, Mettler travelled alone, taking on the role of director, cameraman, sound recordist and interviewer (he did use a small crew in some cities to assist in parts of the film). Before embarking on his long journey, Mettler imposed a strict rule on the project; to use an "instinctive"

approach when recording the people and events around him.

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to crystallize scenes and sequences according to what the material itself suggested. The challenge was to create a structure and a story while preserving the chronological order of events without imposing too much from outside." After almost two years on the dusty road, Mettler finally ended his travels for the film in early 1999, only to embark on a different but equally extensive journey—editing the film.

Faced with close to 100 hours of raw footage, Mettler locked himself in an abandoned hotel, which he purchased with other local artists to form a co-operative, outside Zurich with his co-editor, Roland Schlimme. Editing was a cyclical process of paring down 55 hours of material—a film in its own right according to Mettler—to a three-hour final cut. Once again, the filmmaker resorted to the same instinctive approach used during the shooting phase. "Editing is like composing a piece of music," he says, "often guided by feeling and emotion, rhythm and motifs. But at the same time, it's a story that has characters. The thematics form a web over it, all working associatively, gradually accumulating as the film unfolds."

Regardless, Mettler admits that it was difficult to know how *GGLSD* would end. Sticking to chronology was the guiding rule, while keeping in mind that the three-hour time frame seemed to be the limit for a theatrical release. "But I think there is another film there still," Mettler interjects, referring to the other 52 hours of unused footage, "or perhaps a series which would be much longer and play out with a much different logic allowing you to experience people or situations with a different kind of depth. There are many, many scenes and characters that do not appear in the three-hour version, and in some cases one image is all that remains from an entire study or sequence." Whether it applies to his travels or to the art of filmmaking, Mettler seems to be more interested in the idea of the journey than actually reaching any kind of final destination. "I've always felt there to be an artificiality to the finished film," the filmmaker admits, "because really it is so much about the process, almost like a living organism in its own right. Freezing it into the whims of one filmmaker seems so limited in comparison."

And yet, after a long exhaustive editing process, Mettler, with Schlimme's collaboration, finally achieved the arduous task of condensing two years' worth of image collecting into 180 minutes. Naturally, the film's length, combined with its elliptical non-narrative structure, will likely cause some wariness to those uninitiated in Mettler's unusual style. Any such concerns, however, should be dispelled. Astonishingly—and this may be ultimate proof to Mettler's skill as a non-narrative storyteller—*GGLSD* feels no longer than the average length feature. In fact, because of the multiplicity of layers on which it is structured, *GGLSD* is one of those films that deserves—no, requires—not one but several viewings, each bound to provide drastically new and different insights.

One way of interpreting *GGLSD* is by focusing on the concept of the journey, both in the literal and spiritual sense. The film certainly examines the great lengths people go to whilst on their individual search for identity and meaning. For some, this means religion and community. Christians gather annually at a Toronto airport hangar where Jesus was believed to have briefly appeared in the past, while, halfway across the globe, members of the Bombay Laughing Club regularly meet to laugh at and make faces at each other (there seems to be some kind of therapeutic aspect involved in this odd process). For

others, this means experimenting with cocaine and feeling the rush of the drug through their veins. For others still, this means believing that all living things are somehow interconnected and intimately linked to one another, and so on.

By exposing us to such wildly diverse definitions of identity, concepts of happiness and other personal beliefs, Mettler is in fact asking us to re-examine our own set of values and beliefs; in other words, to embark on a journey similar to his own. "*Gambling, Gods and LSD* requires the participation of the viewer to make associations between what they see and their own personal experience," the filmmaker explains. "They are free to create their own meanings." Naturally, being a viewer himself in addition to being the director of the film, Mettler has his own interpretations: "To me, *Gambling, Gods and LSD* isn't a search for something in particular. I'm not expecting any answers, especially since questions about belief, truth and existence are generally in themselves paradoxical," he explains. "Perhaps the thing I personally desire is an understanding of how to be and how to see. The process of making films can be a great teacher in learning about this. I sometimes feel that if I'm taught enough, it might be necessary to stop making films and live life directly without the intervention of the film medium."

Conjuring varied interpretations of *GGLSD* comes with one potential fallback: the tendency to over-intellectualize on the film's implicit meanings and thus overlook the film at its most basic level, the indelible visceral experience. First and foremost, many of the images in *GGLSD* are absolutely breathtaking. No big surprise here, considering Mettler's origins as a cinematographer, having worked with the likes of Atom Egoyan, Bruce McDonald, Patricia Rozema and Jeremy Podeswa.

Furthermore, Mettler enhances his collage of images with an intricately layered soundtrack of music, which includes original compositions by the renowned Fred Frith, disjointed snippets of dialogue acting as sound bridges between sequences, and last but not least, silence. As in his other films, such an intricately designed soundtrack gives the overall effect of watching, not one, but two films.

In addition, there's the smart and wonderful play of rhythm, swaying whimsically from the serene to the fast and furious (consider, for instance, the exhausting sequence of raving Christians in Toronto followed shortly by a rattlesnake slithering laterally across the screen on the arid ground of Monument Valley). And finally, there's the complexity of the many aural and visual puns strewn across the film. Images of rushing water crashing onto itself at the Helvetian Glacier suddenly turning into foam at a techno rave in a nightclub; an overview shot of the Zurich airport metamorphoses into a plastic maquette of a miniature city; and the explosive force expected at the end of a booming voice-over of a countdown never coming—the film playfully cutting instead to the quiet rustling of a patch of dry flowers and leaves.

Near the end, an Indian villager whom Mettler meets along the way inquisitively echoes the question that has been prodding us all along—what is this film about? One of the most profound elements of the modernist cinema is how so much of the inexpressible can be conveyed in such a relatively limited capacity. The film strip is, after all, of finite length. It is the filmmaker's role to try his or her best to achieve this. But because the film is an inanimate object (and thus cannot speak for itself and explain any of its intentions), the individual perspective brought in by each viewer's interpretation of the artwork, and hence his or her relationship to it, is essential and crucial to the cinematic process. Perhaps this is one of the points that Mettler is trying to get across in his films. When asked point blank about the meaning of *Gambling, Gods and LSD*, Mettler's answer is far from surprising: "The best answer is to watch the film." The rest, it seems, is entirely up to us.

TAKE ONE

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