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Still from *The Feature*, directed by Michel Auder and Andrew Neel. USA, 2008, 177min.

LIFE THROUGH A LENS

Michel Auder: The Feature

Wiebke Gronemeyer Interviews Michel Auder

What is certain about life is that nothing is certain, apart from that it is being lived. But maybe not even that: one could only imagine life when it becomes a manifestation of reality. Reality can be imaginary, too; or faked – or both. Would it matter to find out? Why would it matter to know what is real or imaginary, or at the very least, true? Michel Auder' and Andrew Neel's film 'The Feature' that recently premiered at the Times BFI London Film

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ScheiblerMitte

Festival sets out to pose these questions – but not necessarily to answer them. He was one of the very first to pick up a portable camera and has ever since the late 60's used and produced this medium to document and portray his immediate surroundings. The three-hour long film 'The Feature' appears to be a fictionalised biography of the last 45 years of his life, in which scenes of his marriages to Viva Superstar and Cindy Sherman and his life in the New York art world, drawn from his vast archive of videotapes, intersect with new film footage, shot by co-director Andrew Neel. As both a chronicler and a witness, Auder tells the story of his life, might it be fact or fiction. What seemed irritating and at times self-indulgent appears to be carefully constructed, a tale of fragments that defy conclusion and resist descriptions other than: "life through a lens" – close, sometimes too close. **Wiebke Gronemeyer** spoke to Michel Auder about his film, his life – and how the film might rather tell about the life of others.

Wiebke Gronemeyer: *Some film critics describe you as a "consummate voyeur". I would rather like to describe you as an observant, of both your own lives and the lives of others. When you film, it seems you read life from a kind of meta-level. What was the initial reason for you to pick up a camera?*

Michel Auder: I was interested in photography from an early age. In fact, I mention this in the film at the beginning; I talk about the Rolleiflex camera I worked with, for example. So, clearly I was drawn to photography and composition and creating imagery. But also I think of me as a poetic anthropologist in some way. I am interested in human beings and simply just watching us do what we do. The moving image

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was the perfect synergy of these two things. It made it possible for me to watch, analyze and poeticize, while satisfying my desire to make images.



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WG: *Early on in the film you say that you wanted to oppose to a notion of life that "fits in an envelope". Which framework were you afraid of? A bourgeois lifestyle? Did you manage to escape from it through your films?*

MA: I am not opposed to a bourgeois lifestyle. I wanted to be part of the system, but the system didn't accept me. In a way I'm thankful for that. I wanted to have a proper job, but nobody gave me a job at that time, or anything like that. So my life had a different trajectory. You could say I have 'escaped' the bourgeois life...and I guess in some ways I have. But the film is also about the character moving in and out of the Bourgeois experience: comfort, predictability, luxury, etc. The character moves in and out of situations where he has access to these things and I think that's what allows not only the film but also a lot of my work to create a dialogue about

ScheiblerMitte

the bourgeois experience and wanting to escape from it. So I

guess the answer to your question is that I have not escaped from the Bourgeois lifestyle, but the camera has given me the ability to describe it, view it, analyze it, and at times, live in it, too.

WG: *You describe yourself as a filmmaker, but you are also often described as a video artist since you started to exhibit your work in art galleries in the early 80's, while making film since the late 60's.*

MA: I am embedded somewhere in both worlds: the film world has not paid attention to my work in all those years. The art world was much more interested. I think that all my works are films. The broader world may not understand them as such sometimes, because they have a narrow definition of how the medium can be used. The only way to access this particular world was to create something that film people would be interested in. For *The Feature* we operated with the traditional process of filmmaking, working with a producer, showing it at festivals, a process the film world is familiar with and thus recognizes the work as film. I think both Andrew and I were interested in playing with narrative clichés. We worked hard on walking a delicate line between the poetic and the narrative modes of filmmaking. This means that the film will be swimming between 'art' and 'film'. But these categories are pretty silly anyway.

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WG: *So when you film, do you have any intention in mind, or do you literally just film what you see and then later on appropriate the material to a certain observation? Are your casual recordings actually results of deliberate choices?*

MA: I make very deliberate choices, using a formula that is adapted to the subject matter, which is a description of my immediate surroundings.

I don't agree with the description of a voyeur, because I get involved and I put myself into the situations I am observing. I maybe use a voyeuristic style, but that's it. I think my work is as much the act of shooting, as it is the compilation of the footage. Later I review the material and thus the collection of themes I am interested in. It's not really one or the other way. In all my films I put my life into my set. Sometimes I even marry my own actors, as it has happened in my life. For me, filmmaking is just a way of describing the environment in which not only myself but all of us live in. In the end, it comes down to the question: Who are we, when I make films?

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WG: *Does The Feature answer this question for you? In this film you include old footage of yours and interweave it with a set of completely new narratives. Very early on in the film you stand in a doctor's office, and he tells you that you have a brain tumour. The narrative that you tell – regardless if it is fact or fiction – is framed by the notion of its own ending.*

MA: The film offers no degree of self-therapy for me. That's a very important point. Andrew and I both approached the raw material (my films) and the new fictionalized scenes we worked on as filmmaker, like cold-hearted tacticians. As such we set out to manipulate the highly subjective subject matter into a synthetic narrative. We didn't do this for personal reasons, but because we were both interested in the implication of constructing a video-life in this way. The scene that you describe at the beginning of the film is a reference to filmmaking and its narrative structures: I believe that my doctor has some terrible news to tell me. But that is just a device, because people expect stories in a film. It doesn't even necessarily relate to the question if people want to believe it or not, or what they expect and get out of it. Placing a narrative like this at the beginning of the film is a device, which gives the film the idea of a set story. In *The Feature* we are using all sorts of those devices. There is a story, and there is a proposed ending. We are not interested in what happens with that, we are more interested in the structure of it and how it is possible to in turn subvert the system, the film world with its structures and categorizations.



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WG: Gilles Deleuze explores in his text *The Power of the False*¹ the relationship between narratives, motion and storytelling in film amongst other issues. When watching *The Feature* this text came to my mind as here Deleuze in very theoretical terms analyzes narrative structures that do not relate to each other as a cause followed by an effect but in temporal and spatial terms, as that is the nature of film. Furthermore, the contextualisation of narrative fragments do never serve to explain one or the other. And this seems to me a very poignant description of the relationship between the old film footage and the contemporary narrative with which you seem to frame it: both collide and become discernible with their particularities. You blur the boundaries between fact and fiction, the real and the imaginary. And it seems that you not only let both collide for this film, but propose to question what "real life" can actually mean, and if it is any different from its imagination.

MA: Absolutely. Because of film and so many images that are out there through television and the Internet, nobody really

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knows or wants to believe that there exists anything like “the real”. But it seems that we need at least to believe in it in order to keep going every day. As our life changes everyday, reality changes: it can be reformed, re-cut, and that is what I am doing with my film. I film things. I document them. And then I put the material up on a shelf, eventually coming back to it and start to analyze it. I revise it, creating something of which I think is real or, in turn, I fake it and make people believe that it is real. So my process is always like this. But when making this film the process was intensified because Andrew Neel, Luke Meyer (the editor) and myself were all working together treating the video footage like raw material to be formed according to not only my perception of it, but also theirs. This makes for an even greater level of removal. Because Andrew has not lived a lot of that footage he might bring his own interpretations of truth, opinion, and narrative to the table, which helped to fictionalize it. Although the film is ostensibly very personal, our process in many ways was very impersonal.

WG: *But one way to read this particular narrative of you facing death would be that by resuming your life from a revisionist stance you try to make sense out of it. Are you trying to rescue yourself, escaping the danger or drowning in your recorded past?*

MA: The film is nothing too serious. It’s not that I am trying to discover who I am. Who am I? What am I about? I don’t even know. I just make my films, in one way or another.

This narrative is not a true account.

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WG: *At the beginning of the film you say, that this film is "real, and its not real at the same time". What about truth? Are you interested in truth?*

MA: The truth in my films comes in through poetry. At the beginning we set out a kind of narrative that tells the story of myself, but the film is not about me. We were not interested in establishing what is true, but instead we were interested in discussing the very notion of truth. I think Andrew from the very beginning was aware of the tension between the universal and the personal in my work. I use myself as an example, but the film is about the viewer, about living in general, being human. Younger people may not experience all the things I have been through in 40 years. The film is not about me, although I am acting in it.

WG: *What do you want to communicate then with the film?*

MA: We use my environment, which maybe happened to be a bit different from other peoples, but in fact it is my human environment, as everybody else has one, so I am just posing an example. I am not saying that my reality is representing the real. I am communicating what we all are going through in

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our lives individually, how we have to deal with ourselves. We don't know what it gives to people but we hope it feels like one little storm that shakes up the way in which we experience life.



Still from *The Feature*, directed by Michel Auder and Andrew Neel. USA, 2008, 177min.

WG: *The Feature captures so many moments of your past. If intended or not, it does seem to come across as a wrap-up of your life and filmmaking. Will you produce more films in the future?*

MA: We tend to categorize everything. But this is just one film and I make films everyday. With the technology at hand, I can sit in my studio and go through my old and new footage on the computer and make new works. I have a show coming up in Denmark and while making *The Feature* for the last two years I made other films on the side. This is only one little piece out of my body of work. The film seems so long with its three hours, but it could have been a lot longer. Every scene was carefully selected; I could have made myself look amazingly beautiful and rich and so on. But this is not important to me, as it is just one film. I am moving on, although people think I am dying and this was it.

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WG: *What you have just described goes back to what you have mentioned earlier, that people tend to categorize what they see in order to make sense out of it. But when they see your film and thus a fragment of your life, don't you think they at the same time are inclined to reflect and think about their own life, their reality?*

MA: It's totally about their life. And I can only protect them by saying that it's about me. In the end it's about them. They will walk out and think about their lives, or not. Film interests me on this level.