

The Ring: Review Published in Czech media

“I am not a camera. I am a father.”

A circle: this is the basic principle of the film, and the continuous visual leitmotif. But it is more than an image: it structures the film and links the various locations. The resonance between their different and distant realities is emphasised when the circle that joins them is drawn on a map of the world. And this is an ambitious circle, running from Scotland through the Azores, West Africa and Bosnia.

The film is a compilation of material shot between 1989 and 2002, and edited by the director Angus Reid, whose first impulse was provoked by the birth of his daughter and a changed view of the world. In this respect, *The Ring* is about taking responsibility for a new life and in doing so, coming to terms as a European with the Balkan conflict.

One of the strongest elements in Reid’s film is the presence of the Swiss-Canadian director Peter Mettler, who is also a guest at this year’s festival. What common principles do Reid and Mettler share? First is the entwining of film and personal identity, to be both inside and alongside a project, as though film were a way to see oneself in between the images. Both directors have an intuitive and spontaneous approach to shooting, walking into situations whose outcome cannot be foretold, and in this they share a common aesthetic delight at the magical appearance of fact. Such are the images of Reid’s father, in Scotland, spinning a boat and making the first primordial circle, images that have an amateur’s lightness of touch. As the circle turns, the light changes, and we learn that these were the last images made before the man died. And then images that demonstrate further reason to take responsibility for one’s life: a pregnant woman in the bath.

From there to the mid-ocean volcanic landscape of the Azores islands that create, in this film, a timeless place for artists and philosophers to congregate. “What do you want to do on the island?” “Nothing! To walk and to talk. To think a little about modern art...”

An image is a surface with a meaning. We watch as an inspired painter is tossed about on the waves in a boat. The immediacy of his drawing emphasises the process of inner resonance by which an image is made, extending by analogy from the drawings themselves to the images of the film at large. “An image is only what we imagine.” The painter draws our attention to the special energy of the eye that pours out in the process of looking. How else would we be able to feel someone else’s look behind us? Gombrich identifies “the true value of the image” in its ability “to share information that cannot be codified in other ways”. Only the image can show what is otherwise absent. And Heidigger asserts that “the essence of the image is allowing something to be seen”. The seen and the imagined stand in opposition to one another, as though the image allowed the invisible to be seen, but to be seen only as something outlandish...

From the contemplative timelessness of the Azores we move to West Africa and fall into the reality of contemporary problems. People that may die of starvation. People without drinking water. Abandoned children. Africa spills into a European space, alarming its conscience, and demonstrating the cruelties of its capitalism. Reid interviews goldminers who work without air and water down 100-meter-deep mineshafts, who cannot work without amphetamines and who, for all the danger, are resigned to their lives.

But still he makes the space for an alternative point of view. This is that of the 'forgeron', the community leader, who acts as shaman and balancing principle. He can organise and empower collective endeavour. To invoke magic and to induce trance can provide the means to re-establish identity within conditions of collapse and existential crisis, and many people share the aspiration to move beyond the lonely abstractions of analysis. These are the means to invite a confrontation with the threat of one's own instability, and to find shapes within an ever-increasing psychic chaos (see Ernesto de Martino, *Magic World*). The shaman enters forbidden zones in order to prove that he can master his own instability, and also the instability of others. And the film steps into the camp, the instrument of ethnic cleansing in Bosnia. On the wall of the fatal cellar remain the words: 'Survive this and you will live 100 years'. A prisoner hid a gold ring and they search for it, and although the search is determined the conclusion is withheld, just as the final judgement - the need to apportion guilt in the Balkan conflict - is withheld. Common sense is a useless tool in this instance because it simply doesn't work. And the film neither forgives nor curses, but gathers its strength to step outside the wheel of aggression. Shoot films, not people!

So – what's going on? Full of circles and things left as they are to speak for themselves, the Ring is a critique of global democracy in which everyone has the same rights, but not everyone has the same right to enjoy them.

Tomas Ruta, Dok Revue

The Ring: Review Published in Slovene media

This year's crop at the Slovene Film Festival brought with it two mature feature documentaries, Vlado Skafar's *Peterka* and Angus Reid's *The Ring*. Is this the first glimpse of a better future for documentary film, or just an anomaly in times when Slovene filmmaking concentrates almost exclusively, both in production and in the minds of authors, on fiction? While it is not surprising that the scales are weighted on the side of fiction, it is basically indecent that documentary film is not just treated as being more or less invisible and economically uninteresting, nor yet that it is seen as an awkward alien and subjected to all kinds of predetermined assumptions that question whether it is legitimate filmwork at all. Indecent is the fact that it is simply ignored.

Documentary – which is already a crude label for a vast range of filmmaking – is all-too-quickly reduced to the issue-oriented television documentary (which brings with it hasty assumptions about objectivity and truthfulness that inevitably imply the extinction of the author's point of view) or to the popular science and information programmes that feed banal fascinations but remain, in themselves, completely removed from social reality and its discomforts.

If this is the environment in which documentary is received, then how is it possible to see such a different and original work as that of the Scottish writer and filmmaker Angus Reid? His film, *The Ring*, is an essayistic play of documentary impressions, poetic introspections and uncertain searching that will leave many a self-appointed adept of film language staring into the emptiness and unable to satisfy his spectator's appetite. The need to be told a story is ultimately the need for a conclusion, the closure of a controlled narrative arc, but Reid's journey is anything else but this. *The Ring* is in essence a spacious symbolic structure, a resonating chamber in which variations, comparisons and exchanges steadily pile up, one on top of the other.

Perhaps it is closest to some kind of film palimpsest that can endlessly be changed and that doesn't have an ideal finished form, but within which a basic code can always be deciphered, and one that all the subsequent self-analysis cannot completely conceal. A work that is forever in progress, growing and changing, forgetting and discovering, but that nevertheless remains magically whole and coherent.

Concretely the Ring is a map of Reid's encounters in Scotland, the Azores, West Africa, Bosnia and Slovenia and, viewed from above, they lie on a perfect circle. This circular journey begins in Scotland with what turns out to be the only and last images of a father, made by the author, and the collecting proceeds both by chance and through carefully chosen correspondences and situations.

Among others is a mesmerising painter in the Azores, a young gold-miner in Burkina Faso emerging from the depths of the earth, and the surviving witnesses of a Serbian concentration camp in Bosnia who demonstrate how impossible it is to see the facts amid the horrors of the recent war. In between, Reid returns to Slovenia to remind us that foreignness is a category with very concrete consequences.

But even as The Ring records the inescapable, absurd and merciless temporality of human existence, it finds moments of such play that we can only surrender into something like pure enjoyment. In its textural pleasure and freedom of thought, The Ring is undoubtedly related to Marker's Sans Soleil, but at the same time it shares nothing of Sans Soleil's fantasy anthropology and melancholic commemoration. What drives The Ring is not the distant view or the frozen image but an eternal approach, and an almost alchemistic penetration of the sources of concrete human experience, an actual entering into the world that surrounds one. In the contemplation of its own intolerable position and its preoccupation with expressive possibilities, The Ring is ultimately a narcissistic work that still wishes to embrace the known world and to leave a trace. And despite the fundamentally uncertain and risky sensibility, suddenly, and as a whole, it begins to make sense and to work in the author's hands.

The separate and seemingly incompatible episodes that Reid is collecting and arranging, slowly, by chance and by design, twist together to make their own umbilical cord and to gather into an experience, a mental continuum in time and space that defies the time-dependent nature of the medium to create something timeless and omnipresent. From its fragile but magnificent images (among the cameramen we find the Canadian documentary essayist Peter Mettler, author of the outstanding Picture of Light and Gambling, Gods and LSD) Reid's film is continuously reborn in different ways, and the freedom that he offers us is not only a radical openness of view and thought, but also an opening of documentary sensibility in ways that it almost never offers.

If we can appreciate the freedom and follow this inspiration, then The Ring is an outstanding work of cinema.

Nil Baskar, Ekran

"Prstan je krožnica, po kateri krožijo smrt, zlato in apatija - alegorija sveta, v katerem živimo. ZA+"

Marcel Štefančič, jr., *Mladina*

“The Ring is a circumference around which circle death, gold and apathy – an allegory of the world we live in. *****”

Marcel Štefančič, jr., *Mladina*

The film is not just a multicoloured geographic tour, but it is also compositionally rather diverse, because it interweaves essayistic poetic style with documentary reportage and for the viewers eyes and ears (at least mine) not consistently interesting and attractive. This may be only a first impression and maybe the consequence of the open structure of the film which can be filled with various interpretations for which it is not necessary to have any foundation in the film. Nevertheless it seems that we can see three big motifs in the film: the first aesthetic or artistic, on one level connected with the question of art (the storytelling of a Scottish painter who trusts more his hand than his head because head only gets visions when it is empty and statements of a philosopher about contemporary art who prefers nothing to something), and on the other hand we can see art at work in the form of drawing or moving picture or a painters canvas being carried through the landscape as in filmshots of the Scottish landscape themselves especially the gloomy romantic beach. Two second motives are more connected than it seems the first is reportage about goldmines in a village in Burkina Faso about young miners who 100 meters below ground search for gold and sing songs to scare away the devil and they come up as zombies with black faces covered with white dust. The film moves from Africa to Bosnia among those who survived Serbian camps in Kamenica during the war in Bosnia one of their stories is about a gold wedding ring that someone put between the floorboards before he died and the search for this ring really is not at all similar to gold digging in Burkina Faso but in both stories the gold is in the grip of death.

Zdenko Vrdlovec, *Dnevnik*

»Film ni samo geografsko raznolik, marveč je tudi kompozicijsko precej raznovrsten, saj prepleta esejistično-poetičen slog z dokumentarno reportažo in za gledalčeve oči ter ušesa (vsaj moja) ne vselej enako zanimiv in privlačen. To je lahko le prvi vtis, ki je morda posledica odprte strukture filma, ki jo je mogoče napolniti z različnimi interpretacijami, za katere ni nujno, da bi imele v filmu kakšno podlago. Vseeno se zdi, da bi v filmu lahko razbrali tri velike motive. Prvi bi bil estetski oziroma umetnostni, na eni strani povezan z vprašanjem umetnosti (pripovedovanje škotskega slikarja, ki bolj zaupa roki kot glavi, saj ta "dobi vizije šele, ko je prazna", in izjave filozofa o sodobni umetnosti, ki "ima rajši nič kot nekaj"), na drugi strani pa vidimo umetnost na delu, tako v obliki risanja ali "gibljive slike" oziroma slikarskega platna, ki ga slikar nese skozi krajino, kot v samih filmskih posnetkih škotskih pejzažev, zlasti mračno romantične obale. Druga motiva sta morda bolj povezana, kot se zdita. Prvi je reportaža o zlatokopih v neki vasi v Burkini Faso, o mladih rudarjih, ki 100 metrov globoko pod zemljo iščejo zlato in prepevajo pesmi o vragu, da bi ga prestrašili, na površje pa pridejo kot zombiji, s svojimi črnimi obrazi, pokritimi z belim prahom. Iz Afrike se film preseli v Bosno med preživele iz srbskega taborišča v Kamenicah med vojno v Bosni. Ena izmed njihovih zgodb govori o zlatem oziroma poročnem prstanu, ki ga je nekdo pred smrtjo vtaknil med deske v podu - iskanje tega prstana resda ni niti najmanj podobno kopanju zlata v Burkini Faso, toda zlata so v obeh primerih drži smrt.«

Zdenko Vrdlovec, *Dnevnik*

"Ritem filma je zaradi različnosti tem zelo razgiban in lahko bi rekli, da se počasi stopnjuje preko nedolžne naivnosti, preko teorije življenja, vse do najbolj temačnih predelov človeške duše in civilizacije."

Filip Breskvar, *ŽVPL*

The rhythm of the film is because of its diversity of themes very agitated and we can say that it slowly intensifies through innocent naivty to theory of life and to the darkest spheres of human soul and civilisation.

Filip Breskvar, *ŽVPL*

The Ring: Review published in the American media

The Ring is a precious piece of filmmaking as it dares to follow its own instincts, to trust in its own rhythm, and, above all, to look at the world from just one decent man's point of view, and through that gaze -that is alert, discreet and compassionate – to make sense of life - nothing less. And, yes, it's an ambitious film in the noblest sense: it tries to embrace the whole wide world in its bare hands.

Olaf Möller

Film Comment, USA