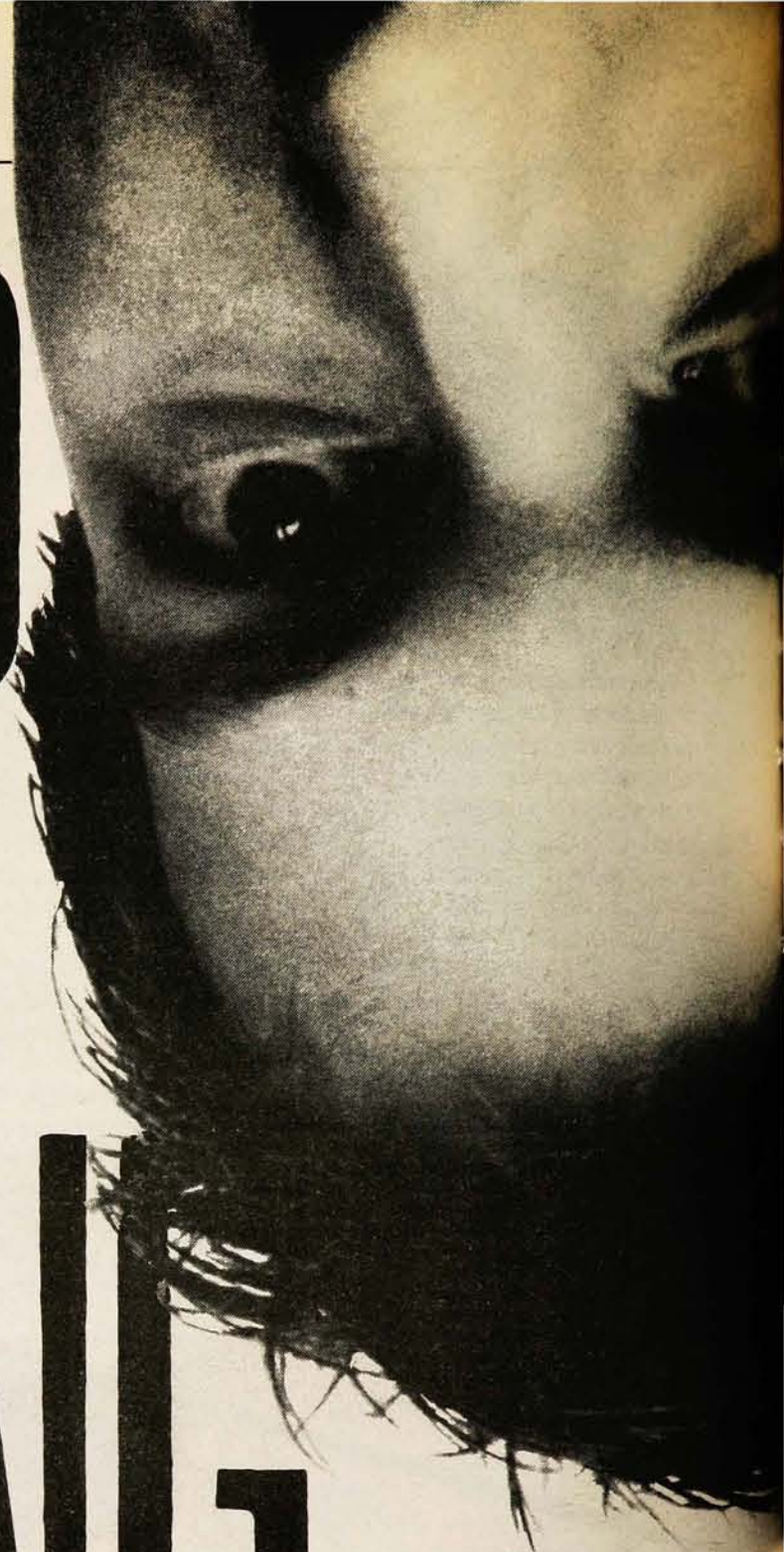


STOP MAKING SENSE

A coffee break
with Peter Mettler
by John Colapinto



John: Okay, this is an interview with Peter Mettler, director of *The Top of His Head*, a million-dollar 35mm feature about a satellite dish salesman named Gus, who, in very simplistic terms "learns how to use his intuition." The film is now in the middle of editing. Pete, how ya doing?

Peter: Just fine John, thanks.

John: Good, what are you up to? What are you doing right this very minute?

Peter: Right now... well, we're going for coffee, you and I.

John: mmmmmmm

Peter: You hear the starlings?

John: Yes! Absolutely!

Peter: They're always out late at night, like at three or four in the morning. That's all you hear. Starlings. It's dead quiet but you -

John: I had no idea. How do you know the name, Starlings? I wouldn't have known that those were Starlings.

Peter: Right. Well, there was a sound recordist who was recording sound for us and I said to him once, "I notice these birds at three or four in the morning" and he said, "Ya, they're a real pain, those Starlings". (laugh)

John: Great.

Peter: Yeah, so now I know that. You learn a lot when you make films, John.



show a film in the dark. The medium itself is a dark medium, with a single light and somehow it feels right. But that's just one level. It's dealing in dreams. Films are dream images no matter what, even if they are straight stories.

John: That is true of even the most crassly commercial film, isn't it?

Peter: Yes. It's nature, in a way.

Peter and John wait for a streetcar to pass.

John: I'm going to spill some beans now and maybe this is a trade secret of yours, but what's fascinating to me, Peter Mettler, is that -

Peter: You used to call me Peter.

John: That's true, but this is an interview, this is our formal selves.

Streetcar Passes

John: I don't know if you still do it, maybe it was only in the writing process, but do you still keep a tape recorder beside your bed?

Peter: Yes I do.

John: And you will actually record dreams. This is totally fascinating to me. Mutters. Half asleep dreams.

Peter: It is truly interesting. It's the strangest, most eerie feeling when you turn on your tape recorder several weeks later and you hear yourself talking about something which you have absolutely no memory of - like an elephant on stilts in the subway - and you're wondering, where did this come from? There is absolutely no recollection at all, and that is great.

John: Incredible. Do those sometimes find their way into your work?

Peter: Little snippets and bits and pieces. But the influence is more on the level of structure and logic rather than the specific images.

PETER AND JOHN ENTER THE ALL-NIGHT CONVENIENCE STORE. PETER BUYS A LARGE COFFEE AND A PLUM. JOHN BUYS A SMALL COFFEE AND A BOUNTY CHOCOLATE BAR. THEY EXIT AND BEGIN WALKING BACK TO THE EDITING ROOM.

John: Peter, you told me a moment ago when the tape recorder was off that you see film as an exploratory process. Does that - WHOOOPS!

(John trips spilling coffee on Peter)

Peter: AAUUGHHHHHHH!!!!

John: Are you OK?!

Peter: Hot! Hot! Yes, I'm OK.

John: So, if you see film as an exploratory process, does that mean your themes are going to emerge from the process of working?

Peter: I'm very interested in trying to make films spontaneously, or, make the film as you go along, and not have it completely prepared before going into it. To put it all down on paper and show someone that it makes sense on paper is predetermining the filmic process and the written document "or literature" begins to have a lot more influence than it should, at least in the area I'm working in. It is not that unusual, artistically, to make a film this way, but it is very difficult to fund a film of this type if you want it released theatrically.

John: By including many more conventionally "dramatic" scenes in *The Top of His Head* than

were in *Scissere*, for example, do you feel that the "story" has taken over from the cinematic spontaneity?

Peter: It's still an exploration. Drama is a medium that's been used forever. Our intellect knows and realizes events in terms of stories and people and narratives. I'm really interested in exploring that, but at the same time, working into other dimensions of expressing ideas that aren't strictly *pat* stories. I like small stories, or stories of the minute, like how a cloud passes over a certain landscape, or how a salmon swims upstream and is hacked to death by seagulls - the little stories that go on all the time. They evoke an entirely different response. I'm presently reading a book about concepts that don't exist in the English language. It's great at pointing out the narrowmindedness of Western thought. There is a Japanese word called "yugen" meaning "an awareness of the Universe that triggers feelings too deep and mysterious for words." Japanese Haiku often evokes "yugen" and the cinema seems a fertile ground to do the same. Watching a sunrise over the great rock Percé, and watching a huge tractor dig up the earth to build a new development, watching the earth turn from the perspective of Outer Space - these too, are important stories.

Hollywood stories are often very good because they're about people, and they're about emotions, so I don't mean to sound critical of that, it is a fundamental way of relating what one has learned - just by showing people's experiences, which are formed into stories. But what I'm interested in exploring is all the in between things that go along with the story, not just the bare bones of the story itself but the subtext.

John: Don't you risk losing your viewer? Don't you worry about that?

Peter: I don't want to turn the viewer off. I do my best so that the film doesn't do that. In the case of *The Top of His Head*, which begins in a very "Hollywood" way, the story itself is about the character shifting perceptions. So the film is trying to show to the audience what is happening to the protagonist's inner life. Categorized views on things start breaking apart and as Gus starts to see between the lines, the viewer starts to do the same thing - by the way that the story is told and by what the images evoke.

John: Your way of looking at the world, Peter, is certainly not the conventional way, not the kind of Western, linear, maybe ruthlessly logical, rational way, although you are a Western guy. You went to all the right schools in Canada and so on, you watched television, bought Alice Cooper records, where do you think it comes from, this way of seeing - which is really what it amounts to, seeing the world?

Peter: Ummmmmm

John: I know this is a tough one. A hell of a tough one.

Peter: Good answer.

John: That's great! That says something in that it's so hard to answer.

Peter: Yeah, I don't really know where it comes from.

John: Have you always thought that way, do you think?

Peter: Yeah. I think you're born with a way of

looking or at least you develop it during your childhood. You never lose the way you look at things. I think that every child plays in an imaginary world and creates situations for themselves and they become characters. It's just like a child's activity and maybe, in a funny way, I never grew out of that. Growing up as an only child meant entertaining myself and often resulted in looking at things instead of engaging in them. When I first found film in high school it immediately clicked as being so right. I just enjoyed it so much and I entered into it in a similar way that a kid enters into an imaginary world. But it's not completely imaginary because you're still alive, and there is more commentary involved now.

John: There's a line in *Scissere*, your first big long film, which has always stuck with me. It's something like "Put one thing on top of another and see what happens." How does it actually go?

Peter: "You can put anything on top of anything and it works."

John: Yes! Is that in some way a clue to the way you work?

Peter: No, unfortunately.

John: Oh really? No? It's not?

Peter: No, because I find I'm a victim myself of the things that I'm trying to defy.

John: That's fascinating...

Peter: I'm very interested in chaos and I'm very interested in the natural order of things. Yet the medium of film is one that requires so much organization and so much planning and so much mmmm minute inspection of detail in the process that it's very hard not to become structuralist and intellectual about how everything is working. So suddenly you become a victim of that. It's very difficult to be impetuous, like you can be in music or painting, because by its technological nature it's a complex and slow-paced process - the words, the image, the sound, the music, the pacing etc.

John: Whereas you'd like to keep it more spontaneous, more off the top of your head, so to speak.

Peter: Right. That's the paradox. The only film that succeeded with this spontaneous approach and that I had a great time making was my last film, *Eastern Avenue*.

John: Describe that.

Peter: It was actually an aid to developing the ideas for *The Top of His Head*. Ideas that we've been talking about. It simply involved taking a camera and travelling to Europe, to places where I had been influenced in the past and then going to places that were completely new to me, and they were non-routine places. With the camera, I tried as much as one can, to respond to the environment at the moment, not trying to contrive ideas or build on structures that I'd already thought of or relate what I was doing now to something I'd shot before. I was trying very much to react spontaneously. When I got home, I kept the rushes in chronological order for maybe a year and looked at it over and over and over again. It became a complete film in that sense, complete with camera runouts and flash frames and then I did a cut which was done quite quickly. The cuts themselves were sort of very non-logical. They responded to form, but the form was directly connected to my experience in

John: Excellent. I'm glad you told me that, or at least the readers of *Cinema Canada*. Now you're off to get a coffee and it is rather late at night.

Peter: Yeah.

John: And I take it that you've been editing lately on *The Top of His Head* and you've been editing at night. Is there any particular reason for that?

Peter: Yeah. During the day there is too much commotion, too many people to talk to and the phone rings too much and I want to phone people too much and there are too many distracting, practical things to deal with.

John: So at night you can concentrate your little head off.

Peter: That's the idea.

John: There seems to be something singularly appropriate about the editing of *The Top of His Head* at night because there is a kind of night-time, dream logic to your work, from your early films such as *Gregory*, and *Lancelot Freely*, through to *Scissere*, and *Eastern Avenue*.

Peter: Yes.

John: Do you think there is something that happens... uh, in other words, can we go beyond the uh...

Peter: Practical realm?

John: Yes!

Peter: It's something to do with the fact that you

those places and the way that I reacted to them.

John: Well in looking at it edited together, did you in fact learn something? I mean obviously you're very happy with this film, so you were very happy with that process.

Peter: It's as though I had recorded some improvised music and then listened to it back and started to recognize my own traits from my formal training or my emotions and personality or just viewpoints on things that all came out as a set of codes. That's what I saw in *Eastern Avenue* – how things associated to each other. I saw how at the beginning of the trip I was in a certain frame of mind and that translated into a certain kind of visual attention to a certain kind of detail – political, because of Berlin and at the end of the trip mystical, because of the sea.

Surprisingly, I found a very solid sense of identity throughout the whole work. Structure, whether it comes intellectually or whether it just happens... there is always a structure and often it mimics natural forms and they often mimic narratives, and that's why narratives remain important.

John: How does all this relate to what you're doing now with *The Top of His Head*. Even the title would suggest that it's a film about tapping into one's intuition and one's spontaneity.

Peter: These ideas are focused on the hero, Gus, a satellite dish salesman who has suppressed his intuitive side, or his illogical side. He's doing something that is not right for him, forcing himself into a mold. He is sent on a search in which the only thing he can end up relying upon is in fact, his repressed intuitions. *The Top of His Head* makes the viewer, like Gus, ask a lot of questions, to explore how we become narrow-minded by putting things into convenient categories and ignoring human suffering or natural beauty. The film tries to explore the balance between intellect and intuition and stresses the importance of the latter. It draws attention to the limits of language and cinematic traditions, to the way that we conventionally look at things superficially, in a way that is often detrimental to our sanity.

John: But being a million-dollar film, shot in 35mm with a large crew, the process of shooting must have been very different than *Eastern Avenue*.

Peter: It was very difficult to be spontaneous. With crews that have been working under a largely American influence in the past few years, this kind of approach is considered very unorthodox and unprofessional, yet I don't think it is impossible. Godard, for example, is expected to take several days before starting to shoot his first scene. He will go on the set, that first day, and won't shoot because something or other is not right. The crew will go home and come back the next day and still something is not right. It takes him a very long time to get his first shot off the ground and a lot of what he does, once things get rolling, comes quite spontaneously.

Bergman, as another example, used to take his entire cast and crew to the area of filming and live together there for a week, without any equipment. They would spend the time talking and getting familiar with the people and the ideas of the film. On a budget level, the money

was not wasted because this time together created an understanding that cut down on the number of takes, unnecessary politics, and hurried circumstances. There is a great respect for the artist over there.

John: Is there a moral judgement implied there? Is the European way better suited to what you want to do?

Peter: I think you need freedom like that to explore while you're in the process. Not to be totally bogged down by the machinery and the budget and by the numbers of people who will only go by the rule. You have to set up a situation in a way that your crew will understand. I think a Canadian crew can really get into a new way of working but you need the support to do that.

PETER AND JOHN SIT DOWN ON THE STEPS TO DRINK THEIR COFFEE.

John: How's your arm?

Peter: It's all red. You want a bit of my coffee?

John: Thanks. There is a way in which you make a viewer look hard at something or look at something closely that is very rare. You don't force the viewer because there's a very gentle quality to the way you make films, the way you shoot and in the way that you edit. You invite the viewer to look closely. Is that something that you can think about, that stylistic urge?

Peter: There's style and then there's looking. When you look through a camera, you look. It's just that simple. You just look at what you're shooting. You see into it. You look into it. Style is a side effect dictated by the content or the personality of the particular film. Styles change but always staying perceptive must be sustained. I'm afraid of the artifice of style and that's partially why I like to operate the camera when I direct. The moment of recording a visual image is inherently private and spontaneous on the part of the operator. Either a director must trust this person's responses completely or start talking in terms of style... which I don't like to do.

John: Influences. Some names. You've mentioned Tarkovsky to me before. What do you think of him?

Peter: —

John: I know. This is the question everybody hates. That every artist hates. The goddamn "influences" question. Peter is, just for the reader's sake, smiling like a sphinx here. He is being very Sphinx-like in not answering.

LAUGHTER

Peter: Well, I wouldn't compare myself to Tarkovsky, but elements of Tarkovsky's language are found in my work. I really love his imagery, his sound, his pacing, the way that his films are a story but they're a metaphor for something much bigger. As *The Top of His Head* is a story... but it's like all the characters of the film make up one character which is the protagonist, which is the viewer of the film.

John: Do you like Nicholas Roeg? Do you like his work?

Peter: (Laughs) I remember *The Man Who Fell To Earth*. When I first saw it at the time I thought,

"Well, what's going on here? This is a strange way to put a story together." But it was completely intriguing and captivating all the same. Subsequently I've seen it and analyzed it more. He's an influence because I got something rewarding out of it.

But I think my strongest influences come from other places – experiences, people I've met, things I've seen on the streets, other filmmakers that I've worked with like Atom Egoyan, Bruce McDonald and Jean-Marc Larivière, other artists' work like Fred Frith and Jane Siberry, Pina Bausch dance theatre for example. When you talk about other films as influence the question should maybe be "What films do you wish you would have made?"

John: Thank you Peter. I know those "influence" questions are tough on you.

Peter: You're welcome.

John: So how's the editing going, anyway?

Peter: Good.

John: Good.

Peter: I should probably be getting back to work.

John: Just a couple more questions.

Peter: (GROAN)

John: As you begin to work more and more with a script, with more linear storytelling, as in the experience of *The Top of His Head*, did you discover that there was some richness and some excitement in filming some of the more "conventional scenes", meaning the scenes with character development and storyline? Was there some juice in that to squeeze out? Was there some excitement there?

Peter: Definitely. For one, working with actors is new to me. In portraying emotions and characters with actors, I found myself learning a lot from them in the process of telling them what to do. They were teaching me how to tell them in the process. I learnt a lot being around some really good actors: Steven Ouimette; Gary Reineke and Christie MacFadyen. They were all completely different individuals with different ways of working. If the drama is not right, that's the thing that everyone notices first. It's the actors that are king. It's really an interesting form of expression to deal with. I just find that it's very dominating. In the cutting too, a lot of energy is put into cutting the performance to make some kind of sense. At the same time I'm trying to stop making sense.

John: Is the purpose of a film like *The Top of His Head* to convert Western, logical, linear thinking? Who are you talking to with your work?

Peter: If you just think about the evolution of our species in the last hundred years, let's say from the time of the invention of the car, we've definitely been speeding up. When you walk you have a pace and a perspective of things in the environment and you see a fair amount of detail. This rhythm is biologically natural to our bodies. When you take a car, everything speeds up, you see different details but miss the perspective of walking. That information whooshes by at a tremendous rate. I think mentally we can handle this intense difference but biologically we are still in the state of walking. Our intellect has created technology that is far ahead of our own biological time. That is why 90 per cent of people living in the city are tense. I don't think stress is a natural thing.

John: The implications in regard to what we were talking about earlier are fascinating. About slowing down, how your films kind of slow down the rate at which people look. What I think of as the Peter Mettler signature slow pan... a slow, gentle, graceful pan that asks people to look at a slower rate. It almost seems to slow the pulse down and it forces you to see slower. Interesting.

Peter: Yeah, it tries to see at a more natural pace. At a pace that doesn't cause your head to buzz and doesn't obliterate the view of what you're seeing. You're always seeing out of your head, there's no question. It's like when you walk into a forest after you've been in a city for months, you can't see the forest for a week. You have to be in the forest for a week before the mechanisms in your head calm down and before the din, the rushes in your head relax, before you can really see what's there, before you can feel the rate of how things are growing, and how the cycles of light and dark are affecting you. The film looks at this and compares it to the layering of ideas and images and sounds – like flipping through a hundred channels on a TV in a minute.

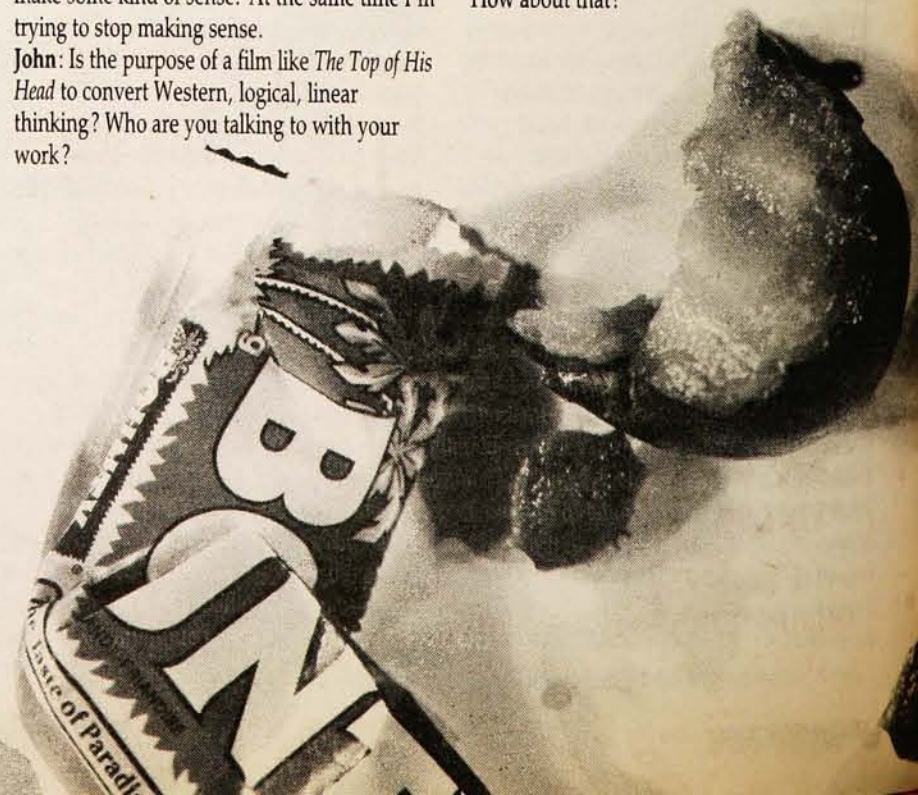
John: But is there not an argument, Peter, that by living in cities we learn how to naturally edit?

Peter: Yeah.

John: But you have to learn how to shut out noise, to learn to see faster.

Peter: Do you hear the Starlings?

John: ... Yes ... Yes I do. They're back again. How about that!



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