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Weekend Herald  
**ARTS**

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# Making sense of a complicated reality

Dutch documentary maker Heddy Honigmann talks to Herald film critic **Peter Calder**

**B**EFORE penguins became exemplars of conservative family values; before a fat man in a baseball cap won an Oscar by asking loaded questions and making stuff up; before eating McDonald's for a month became a legitimate subject for a film, there was Heddy Honigmann.

The Dutch-based filmmaker, a regular presence at the main midwinter film festivals since the mid-90s, is little-known outside Europe — the only English-speaking country in which her films have won awards is Canada. But she has long been one of the most assured, original and interesting practitioners of documentary filmmaking.

In films like *Forever*, which observed visitors to the famous Pere Lachaise cemetery in Paris to make a film about life and the vitality of art; *Crazy*, which, to stunningly powerful effect, approached the experience of war veterans through the songs that sustained them during or after their ordeals; and *O Amor Natural*, a meditation on desire in which octogenarian Brazilians refracted their sexuality through their experience of a famous poet, Honigmann has displayed time and again her ability to directly access the characters of the people on whom she turns her camera. (She also, incidentally, made a fiction feature, the breathlessly passionate *Au Revoir* — for my money the best film since *Brief Encounter* about illicit love.)

Her newest film, *El Olvido* (*Oblivion*), is a return to Peru, where she was born in 1951, the daughter of Polish and Austrian Holocaust survivors.

Through offbeat, slyly ironic and often bitterly poignant interviews with members of the working class and underclass, she creates a striking portrait not just of that country but, as she puts it, "one that would apply to any country where there has always been an abuse of power".

She also observes the city's legion of street performers — not buskers but poor children who stage extraordinary impromptu displays on pedestrian crossings in front of growling, stationary traffic and then, like window washers, weave through the lines of cars collecting a few cents for their work. It is a touching and beautiful film and a brilliantly penetrating and accurate portrait of urban Latin America.

Speaking from her Amsterdam home, Honigmann professes herself surprised that *El Olvido* is in a documentary-only festival.

"I've always thought documentary should be side-by-side with fiction films," she says. "I don't know why they divide it like that. It's an artificial distinction."

"Fiction films would be impossible if documentary did not exist. Inspiration for fiction comes from real things happening. We have so many documentaries now that say 'based on a true story'; maybe we should have documentaries that say 'based on



IN DEEP: *El Olvido's* subjects paint a striking portrait of Peru.



**Fiction films would be impossible if documentary did not exist.**

HEDDY HONIGMANN  
DIRECTOR

## DOCUMENTARY PICKS

Heddy Honigmann's *El Olvido* is a standout in the DOCNZ 2009 Documentary Film Festival which plays at the Rialto Cinema in Newmarket from February 26. Other recommended titles are: *At the Death House Door*: A contemplative, almost tender portrait of a prison chaplain working on Texas' Death Row whose attitude to execution undergoes a profound change is told in parallel with a story of a miscarriage of justice.

*Operation Filmmaker*: Fascinating, sometimes hilarious study of the collision of culture and personality that occurs when a well-meaning American film crew try to help an Iraqi

film student. A timely reminder that recipients of charity may not always play the role assigned to them by liberal benefactors.

*Food Fight*: The details of the damage wrought to the food chain by global capitalism will not be news to anyone who has read Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma* and at times this film reads like an infomercial for the famous San Francisco restaurant Chez Panisse, but it's an interesting watch for anyone who likes eating.

*Cuban Song*: The camera rolls and Cubans sing (as they do). The best portrait I've seen of life in the much-romanticised country. Peter Calder



BEST INTENTIONS: *Operation Filmmaker* explores the collision of culture.

fiction'. Reality has become so complicated now that it is a fiction, it is not dependable."

The way Honigmann negotiates this challenge, she says, is by "taking a small part and trying to understand it. When the boundaries are clear and small, you can go deep."

She is fond of quoting the great American photographer Dorothea Lange, who, with images like the famous *Migrant Mother*, defined the Dust Bowl years in the 1930s: "The camera is

an instrument that teaches people how to see without a camera."

"Framing and choosing helps to make sense of a complicated reality," says Honigmann. "You put the camera in what she calls "a good place to take a 'close up' of reality. Otherwise you can't see poverty, you can't see even joy."

A key element of Honigmann's films is that the camera's gaze is patient: her average cut rate is one per minute (the Hollywood average is 15,

and in action sequences 30).

"It is about giving space to character," she says. "And silence is important, too. The sound of silence is so powerful. Even when my films are talky, I always say it is not at all about talking heads but about talking hearts. When hearts talk, there is silence, otherwise they don't understand each other."

Occasionally, you can hear Honigmann break the silence in her films but it is rarely with a question: in

one, she tells the driver of a dilapidated cab, "All the loose bits on your car make salsa music"; to a hat maker in *O Amor Natural*, overcome by happy memories of life before military government, "You have lovely hands."

"I don't do interviews," she explains. "I make conversation. I know that sometimes you have to help your characters out of silence. There are moments when I break it — either by saying something or by cutting.

"In *Crazy*, there are difficult

moments when an interviewee might give us a sign to stop and most of the time I stop after 10 seconds or less, because it's enough. It's a matter of finding the boundary between when a human being is giving something and when the viewer is becoming a voyeur."

Honigmann sees *El Olvido* as her best film: "Free as the flight of a bird, full of irony, humour and sadness," she described it in an email when I first contacted her.

"In a way there are elements of all my films in *El Olvido*," she says. "The power of love and of music, the city as a character. But it is such a free film because it is told through the ironic observations of the characters. If you make a film that is trying to make an accusation it would be much less free."

An American critic observed that all Honigmann's films are about "the plight of exiles". It's an assessment she agrees with.

"Even *Au Revoir*, because when you are in love and living such a passion you are an exile, because nobody understands you. Yes, they are all films about exiles but also about the joy they can find in music or love."

"Are you an exile?" I ask her, thinking of her birth and personal history. "Of course," she replies. "If you are a little bit intelligent, you are always an exile."

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