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THE 12th NEW YORK UNDERGROUND FILM FESTIVAL

By Katrin Frick



Crispin Hellion Glover's *What is it?*

With enough free Pabst Blue Ribbon to keep a hipster house party raging for days, the New York Underground Film Festival's (NYUFF) entries seemed to mirror a party attendee's iPod: classic selections, something cheeky and fun, some guilty pleasures, and a whole slew of experimental offerings.

In her second year as director, Kendra Gaeta vetted an unprecedented 2000 entries with help from second-in-command Mo Johnston and guidance from Ed Halter. The 12th NYUFF was an international convergence of ideas — thanks to the involvement of Italian

Institute of Culture and the Dutch Consulate — that entertained, educated and worked together to shake the long-standing image of "tits and guns" that is often associated with the "underground" film scene.

A mainstay of the fest were the many video shorts, shot with little or no budget on DV, clustered throughout the 5-day event.

Each short made the most of its brief running time to riff on a range of visual media and topics: "The Total Impakt: Shorts Programme," curated by Arjon Dunnewind, created a platform for media artists whose work previously screened at the Dutch-based Impakt festival; "Joanie 4 Jackie" celebrated the ten-year anniversary of the female-only video chain letter syndicate founded by Miranda July; *Oh My God* by John Bryant took a subversive gander at what any normal, suburban husband and father would do upon discovering his family brutally murdered — i.e. stab them, shoot them, and smear blood around the house in

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attempts to shake them to life, all while wondering, "How did this happen?"; and Jacqueline Salloum's *Planet of the Arabs*, a trailer for an imaginary action film, explored the vilification of Arabs and Muslims in popular mass media.

Among the documentaries sprinkled throughout the festival, *Flowergirls* by Robert Todd and Andrew Dickson's *Nate Preston, King of Portland* both displayed a soft-spot for their quirky subjects, while John Rose's *Neighbors*, in which a serial newspaper thief is interrogated by his neighbors, decidedly did not.

Highlights from the many experimental shorts on hand included Keith Wilson's *Don't You Bring Me Down Today* and Tara Mateik's *PYT*, in which scantily clad twentysomething's gyrated to pop songs; Skizz Cyzyk's *Manager's Corner*, an animated look at foul-mouthed Baltimore Orioles' manager Earl Weaver answering questions on baseball; Christopher Harris's *Reckless Eyeballing*, a black-and-white optic explosion of repeated phrases and images examining desire; and several films by Jeremy Bailey, a one-man revolution on the way we use video, computers and our bodies to create art.

In the end, however, it was the current vogue for all things vintage that generated the biggest reaction from the fest's audiences: Ted Passon's *My Sister's Friends Always Seemed So Old* recycled found footage of a 1980's high school class of teased haired lip sync-ers; Cory Arcangel projected Simon and Garfunkle concert footage and used a cardboard hand to matte out Paul Simon in *Sans Simon*; Found Footage Festival director Nick Prueher screened a couple of gorey "safety" videos by the Federated Mutual Insurance Company that featured rubber body parts being ruthlessly sawed off and copious amounts of fake blood; and Arnold Schwarzenegger could be seen in the travel video *Carnival in Rio* (circa 1983) teaching a young Brazilian woman the meaning of the word "suck" as she sampled a carrot stick.

In between the mash-ups and music videos, there was time to sit back and sip that Pabst Blue Ribbon. (Too bad I'm not a beer drinker.)

Feature films ran the gambit of genres, emotions, and subject matter. *Exist: not a protest film*, the second feature by Esther Bell (*Godass*), foregrounded the internal relationships, varying scope of beliefs, and race and class backgrounds of a group of young urban activists (including Tunde Adebimpe of *TV on the Radio*) and squatters, with whom she collaborated on the film's script.

Taking this notion and rewinding 34 years to wander the beaches of San Diego, *Captain Milkshake*, originally released in 1970, examined a different sect of activists struggling with, strangely enough, the same questions. Hippies groove to Country Joe & the Fish and the Steve Miller Band, equally concerned with the fate of soldiers in Vietnam and how to score a killer stash of weed; mothers and fathers discuss the war over a steak dinner in their suburban home using every antiquated slang term for the Vietnamese possible; and a young man, Paul, tries to decide on whether to go AWOL and flee with his flaxen-haired love, Melissa, or continue his duty as an American citizen. Released after being tangled up in court for years, *Captain Milkshake* made its New York premiere at the NYUFF, and I couldn't tell who was more appreciative, the audience or its director, Richard Crawford.

In *The Will of Dean Snider*, director Jaime Kibben collaborated with his neighbor and good friend Dean Snider, a San Francisco experimental artist and filmmaker with Parkinson's, to document the course of Snider's disease in the weeks prior to his decision to end his life. Mixing admiration with remorse, *The Will of Dean Snider* is an intriguing case study that explores the thin line separating objectivity from subjectivity in documentary filmmaking.

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With visual panache, Reynold Reynolds and Patrick Jolly's debut feature, *Sugar*, examines the paranoid psychological breakdown of a young woman, excellently portrayed by co-writer Samara Golden. The cautious new tenant of a one-room apartment, she tries her best to take the place of Anthony, the apartment's mysterious former owner, but fear and isolation wear her down as voices start to materialize and the walls begin to shake.



Reynold Reynolds and Patrick Jolly's *Sugar*.

From documentary to fiction to somewhere in between, Ben Wolfensohn's *High School Record*, portrays the senior year of four eccentrically awkward teenagers, skillfully enveloping the viewer in their world — in part, because you once had that really weird haircut, too.

Nothing could have prepared one for the hyper-colored freak-out of *A Family Finds Entertainment*. Writer/director/editor Ryan Trecartin blew my mind as he and an over-the-top cast filmed their version of a young man's coming out of the closet — or was it a comment on suicide, drugs, and face paint? Whatever it was, after the electronically manipulated voices and PhotoShopped images came to rest — and the XPPL band vacated the theatre following a guerrilla performance — the result was pure entertainment.

The big news at this year's NYUFF were its bookenders: Asia Argento's *The Heart is Deceitful Above All Things*, based on the J.T. Leroy novel, and *What Is It?*, Crispin Hellion Glover's decade-in-the-works psychotronic extravaganza.

Argento, who co-stars in *The Heart is Deceitful*, isn't afraid to look as dirty and gritty as the life she is examining. A close retelling of the source material, Jeremiah (played by Jimmy Bennett at first, then Dylan and Cole Spruce later) is dragged back into the cold, faithless world of his mother, Sarah (Argento). He seeks salvation from boyfriends (Jeremy Sisto and Marilyn Manson), a grandfather (Peter Fonda) and even a social worker (Winona Ryder), and still finds his life riddled with prostitution, drugs, seduction, abuse, fabricated identities, and other travails unimaginable for a growing psyche.

Speaking of a damaged psyche, Glover's *What is It?* is, quite possibly, the most unique film ever created — and the most aptly titled. Glover sucks his audience into a world of lost souls looking for love and acceptance as they are monitored by a "Dueling Demi-God Auteur and The young man's inner psyche" (played by Glover), and his minions. Add to the mix the image of Shirley Temple as a Nazi, a naked man with cerebral palsy in a large shell being fondled by a naked women in an animal mask, watermelons, and a minstrel in black-face yearning to be a slug and you have — at least according to the loose Q&A following the screening — Glover's critique of originality, consumerism, homogenization and the Hollywood machine. Despite making one's brain matter reel, you could still feel Glover's sincere admiration for the material. After all, he did manage to humanize the most inhuman of imagined worlds.

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