

FILM/ART Featuring Michel Auder

By **Andréa Picard**

“Usually, you eat, you get laid, you’re worried about money, you have money, you’re happy, you’re sad, you cry, you have more sex, if you’re lucky, and then, you know, there’s nothing left in life, it’s just what it is.”—Michel Auder in *The Feature*

Watching *The Feature*, vidéaste Michel Auder’s return to filmmaking (on HD video; co-directed by Andrew Neel, grandson of the late artist Alice Neel, Auder’s longtime friend and frequent subject), which premiered in the Forum at this year’s Berlinale, a sense of length becomes almost painfully pronounced, and not just because the film is long, which it is at 2 hours and 54 minutes (after the public screening, Auder announced it should be called *The Trailer*, and that the real film for him—the first cut—lasts more than eight hours). The overriding sense of summation that fidgets through the fictionalized auto-portrait likewise induces a squirmy viewing, though surprisingly, that’s a product of its strength, of its flashes of raw humanity cloaked in a narcissism too grand and too self-aware to be real.

Then again, what is real in this self-described “fictional biography?” As the character of Michel Auder, our ruminative art star auto-portraitist, poking out from behind a rather ridiculous tondo of fruit and flowers, tells us, his image is to be judged ultimately by the culture that receives it (and sadly, very prematurely by the hordes who fled the Forum’s press screening within the first 15 minutes). His 5,000 hours of obsessively recorded and compiled video could be cut, censored, edited, and re-edited in countless ways—as could this article—portraying him as “a total asshole, a monster or a great poet.” So how does he come off in *The Feature*? Obscenely vain, for one, and also profoundly lonely, charming at times and smart, despite his frequently inelegant English, which is not redeemed by his faded French accent. The tropes he plays out are ones belonging to a self-serving artist whose persona clings to a reality infused with the fictions of a fairytale. An unwonted fairytale, perhaps, but

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one that includes a fair dose of glamour, privilege and a certain renown—all of which combat rather voraciously against the mediocrity of a blanched, everyday existence. Even his intentionally unkempt haircut demonstrates this willing fight. And he knows it.

Auder is a handsome 63-year-old French man, who has been living in the US since the early '70s. His wild life has been almost pathologically self-recorded since the late '60s when he traded in his still camera and made his first feature film, *Keeping Busy* (1969). As a novice fashion photographer, the leap into filmmaking with the Zanzibar clan was not a colossal one. (Refer to last issue's column if you don't know why.) Auder borrowed Philippe Garrel's 35mm camera, took Silvina Boissonnas' generous production money and hit the road with Viva "Superstar" and Louis Waldon, who had recently arrived in Paris with Nico, after having shot Warhol's notorious *Blue Movie* (1969). *Keeping Busy* documents Viva and Waldon languidly *not* getting busy in various luxurious hotel rooms in Rome, recounting their *Blue Movie* escapades to an unknown Italian woman. Fact and fiction coalesced during production, and the film bears witness to Viva and Auder falling in love, the first of many personal experiences to be recorded by the artist. While the film exists as an exemplar of the Warhol-Zanzibar correspondence, Auder was more of a constellation figure, not really interested in pursuing a filmmaking career, though his path, one could argue, was just as ardent as and bears a number of similarities to that of Garrel, the sole (other) Zanzibar member still making feature films today. Auder obsessively makes video the way Garrel obsessively remakes Nico, and the two are former heroin addicts who have consistently made their addiction subjects of their work.

The discovery and purchase of the first-ever available Sony Portapak video camera was a major turning point in Auder's life; since then, he has since chronicled his experiences and that of his friends with astonishing regularity, candour, and a seemingly boundary-less intimacy. The footage, much of which consists of or contributes in a recycled, resurrected or re-cut manner to his individual video works—

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some are available through Electronic Arts Intermix (and they are all listed at michelauder.com)—spares no one, especially not himself. Quite a bit different from conceptual video art, Auder's works eschew phenomenological conceits; rather, they stem from the Warholian school of filmmaking, and have a rough-hewn home movie aesthetic and a thread of expiation coursing through them, at least from what is seen of the footage in *The Feature*. It's no wonder that Jonas Mekas, the master poet of diaristic filmmaking, turns up for dinner and sings a little song. The two NYC émigrés seem close, part of the same circle of friends; one imagines that over the past 40 years they've likely both turned up at the same event or party with camera in hand. One assumes that the mediums and approaches, until recently, would have been quite different, one opting for a Super 8 lyricism based on engagement, the other for a digital form of art brut based on observation. Now they are both working in video, and the tone has veered toward the nostalgic, toward an ending heretofore inconceivable. Watching recent Mekas films and *The Feature*, one is bound to ask why the present makes the past seem so urgent?

The Feature feigns many things, and attempts almost heroically to transcend its own truth (which is, after all, likely a form of non-truth), including the nostalgia inherent in its summative structure. Its pseudo-fiction saves the film from itself in a perverse kind of way. Looking back over one's life, seeing it as "feature length," with all the good parts amounting to just shy of three hours is a harsh reality to confront. Yet, if it's all made up, one escapes, however briefly, the eventuality that we all face. The idea of death, specifically Auder's death, is introduced early on and functions as a framing device through which the first person "fictional narrative" unfolds. Following a direct address preface, which is equal parts corny, parodic, and playful in its staginess (and must be a jab at contemporary video art), the film opens with Auder standing in disbelief with his doctor who has just relayed some terrible news, the worst possible. Auder has a terminal brain tumour and will soon die if he does not undergo "poison" treatment. Since his plight is irreversible, our macho protagonist refuses medical treatment (who can blame him?) and embarks on a journey of self-evaluation via his

tapes.

Through them, the life and times of Michel Auder emerge, told in third person: his move to NYC; his marriage to Viva and their infamous time at the Chelsea Hotel; the birth of their daughter, Alexandra; the dissolution of their marriage; Auder's ongoing substance abuse; his frustrations with the art world and his attachment to video; the beginning and end of his marriage to Cindy Sherman; his daughter's graduation, etc., etc.... It becomes near impossible to not fall prey to sentiment—the material is raw, moving, and sometimes unsettling. Despite the privacy, or painfulness of certain situations, the camera was never put away; it was made to bear witness. Auder's dependency on his video camera is fascinating, given that he was a pioneer video *raconteur* (now there are countless websites devoted to this very idea), though also maddening, as, for example, when he speaks in what now are clichés about his heroin use. ("I'm going to get this monkey off my back," he intones.) Clearly an audience awaits; a certain authenticity is lost through conscious construction. Auder never slips too far or too deeply, and is never out of grasp. He repeatedly talks himself through his fuck ups, knowing he'll make it through, that he can forever prolong life—his and others'—with his video camera. It alone seems to placate his moments of neuroses.

Armed with his protective shield, Auder has buffered himself through the years. "My life is based on my video works," he explains. Those around him have not been so lucky. Viva, a consummate exhibitionist, grows fed up with having her every move documented, their already cramped space made all the more claustrophobic by Auder's incessant filming. And even though he's acutely aware that Cindy Sherman abhors being on camera, to the point where she's made a career out of disguise and disfigurement—one which he cannot, alas, compete with—he practically stalks her with his lens. Her darting eyes betray a palpable discomfort, while he "O'Dares" to torment her further. But, as Proust famously said, "Only through art can we emerge from ourselves and know what another person sees."

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It may seem a ludicrous leap, but Proust was the ultimate chronicler of his time, melding fact and fiction, sometimes beyond discernment. He proffered an auto-historia (as much as it is an auto-hysteria) funneled through the human condition, which, let's face it, will never be cured, like Auder's growing tumour (which may or may not be real). In *The Feature*, Auder tells us that the "documentary footage seems to be real, and is real, but is not real." Not real, never was real, or no longer is real? Proust again: "Time, which changes people, does not alter the image we have retained of them." Auder has certainly retained a number of images over the years; they are lo fi, swimmy, degraded, veering green and despite their decay, seem to exhibit something of the genuine spirit of those he recorded. His voyeurism runs deep, perhaps a result of his watching—the quality or calibre of his watching. His goal, he says, "is to translate the appearance of my time according to my appreciation of it." Every bit of reality can give birth to fantasy, to story, to a new reality. This is how we triumph. Or, simply, this is how we get by. But for Auder, capturing everything he sees on video is clearly vocational.

Obviously, *The Feature* does not reconcile fact and fiction; instead, it blurs the definitions seemingly represented by the film's two clearly demarcated registers: that of the archival footage and that of the new, theatrical material. In his guise as "Michel Auder," living a fulsome and extravagant life, replete with beautiful women and a rock-cut pool overlooking Los Angeles, the art world is revealed as a sham, and his character exhibits a repulsive narcissism. And yet, when caught in quiet moments, something poignant emerges—a glimmer of truth that rebels against the entire endeavour. Or maybe, that's what makes *The Feature*. The contradiction between the preposterous persona and the cloistered works drains the distance the camera inherently creates. Auder confesses that whatever he's remembered is in some way fictional. Despite all the transgressions (formal and philosophical), his humanity includes a faith that upsets the pathetic statement that begins this piece. It is in this distrust of fact and fiction that the film ultimately achieves. It takes a lot of patience to get there, but such is life.

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