

OBLIVION

A Film by Heddy Honigmann



93 minutes / color / 35mm / 2008
Spanish, w/English subtitles

An **Icarus Films** Release
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SYNOPSIS

The latest documentary from Heddy Honigmann (*Forever, Metal and Melancholy, O Amor Natural*) focuses on Peru's capital city of Lima, revealing its startling contrasts of wealth and poverty, and how many of its poorest citizens have survived decades of economic crisis, terrorism and government violence, denial of workers' rights, and political corruption.

Demonstrating anew Honigmann's extraordinary talent as one of the most empathetic documentary filmmakers at work today, *OBLIVION* provides intimate and moving portraits of street musicians, singers, vendors, shoeshine boys, and the gymnasts (some mere children) and jugglers who perform at traffic stops. The film also visits with small business owners, from a leather-goods repairman and a presidential sash manufacturer to a frog-juice vendor, and contrasts the work and home environments of bartenders, waiters and waitresses employed at Lima's finest restaurants and hotels but who live in slums in the city's surrounding hillsides.

The stories of these resilient and resourceful Peruvians are interwoven with scenes of contemporary political protests and archival footage of the rogues' gallery of the nation's presidents—Fernando Belaúnde (1980-1985), Alan Garcia (1985-1990), Alberto Fujimori (1990-2000)—whose mismanaged or corrupt regimes have turned the majority of Peru's citizens into perennial victims of economic impoverishment and political abuse.

For most viewers, who are reminded of Peru only by news reports of a major earthquake, a presidential election or the discovery of a decades-old mass grave of army massacre victims, *OBLIVION* introduces us to the everyday reality of Lima, celebrating a people who, albeit politically powerless, have resisted being consigned to oblivion.



MAIN CHARACTERS



1.) Henry ("the shoehiner without dreams") 2.) Luis Cerna 3.) Adolfo Chavez
4.) Mauro Gómez 5.) María with daughters Lala, Esmeralda, & Estefanía
6.) Jorge Kanashiro 7.) Lucía Ruiz 8.) Daniel Gutiérrez Grados 9.) David Gutiérrez

AWARDS AND FESTIVALS



**Prize of the Ecumenical Jury
Leipzig Festival for Documentary
and Animated Films
2008**



**Silver Dove
Leipzig Festival for Documentary
and Animated Films
2008**



**International Film Critics (FIPRESCI) Prize
Leipzig Festival for Documentary
and Animated Films
2008**



**Best Director
DOCNZ
2009**

REVIEW EXCERPTS

“A masterpiece... you feel a direct, easygoing and warm approach from the director to her characters.”—Dox Magazine

“A multilayered cinematic cocktail which reveals a poetical and Chaplinesque vision of the resilience of humanity.”—International Film Critics Federation



Posted: Thurs., Sep. 25, 2008, 4:07pm PT

Oblivion

By JAY WEISSBERG

Much-feted docu helmer Heddy Honigmann returns to her native Peru for "Oblivion," a nicely tuned multi-voiced meditation on the country's failure to provide for the common man. Choosing people who work near the halls of power, Honigmann lends a sympathetic ear to a weary populace living in a nation where politics is a byword for corruption. Though occasionally so enamoured with her subjects that she includes more footage than necessary, the docu still exhibits her usual expert eye full of wryly expressed quiet outrage. Docu fests will jump, and Euro smallscreen play is assured.

No solid knowledge of Peru's abysmal political record is needed, as Honigmann subtly but firmly underlines the disconnection between presidential promises of good governance and the reality of a people left stranded by an unconcerned elite. Apart from the charm and warmth of most of her subjects, the docu's strong suit is in the construction, using each new interview to then jump back to a swearing-in ceremony where oaths are revealed as mere hollow verbiage.

Her cafe philosophers are at the heart of the piece, people like bartender Jorge Kanashiro, serving up straight talk with a jigger of perspicacity and more than a dash of cynicism. All agree that the difficulties of the average Peruvian never reach the presidential palace. Perhaps most disturbing is the sense that everyone is simply resigned to the status quo, convinced that while there may be slight changes of fortune up or down, their powerlessness is forever.

Though Honigmann shows brief glimpses of the watering holes of the upper classes, she spends most of her time with people like David Gutierrez, a student trying to earn money by juggling on street corners, or Maria and her three little girls, who do cartwheels before stopped traffic. In referring to the "lovely" Maria, Honigmann appears to be less concerned with the woman's parenting skills than most docs, who will surely question Maria's statements and her Cheshire cat grin as her young girls work and play among traffic even though her eldest was killed in similar circumstances.

Fewer shots of the jugglers and boulevard gymnasts and more of people like the emotionally numb shoeshine boy Henry would help tighten up occasionally sagging elements. It's disturbing, of course, to realize that the situation in Peru has probably gotten more entrenched since her 1994 docu "Metal & Melancholy," which is presumably precisely her point.

Visuals are flawless, and understated editing builds the argument through a seamless but deliberate construction. Music, from Chopin to local composers, gently underscore tone without forcing emotions.

Reviewed at San Sebastian Film Festival (Latin Horizons), Sept. 18, 2008. Running time: 94 MIN.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

If Lima, the capital of Peru, were to be covered in dust, the city would be invisible.

But it's not and yet hardly anybody ever notices it or gives its people, cheated and neglected by their rulers for centuries, any thought.

It takes an earthquake registering 8 on the Richter scale, or the recent discovery, in the most desolate mountains of Peru, of one of the largest mass graves in the history of the dirty war between the Peruvian army and the guerrilla movement, Shining Path, for the country to be noticed for a few days or weeks.

In OBLIVION, Lima represents all other Latin American cities, whose seas or mountains are graveyards. Horror is omnipresent: in its streets, bars, hospitals, and neighborhoods. But the country isn't "hot news."

Reminiscence is a recurring theme in almost all of my films. With OBLIVION, I wanted to create a poetic celebration of this forgotten city and its people.

A few years ago it was a waiter, at work in a fancy restaurant, who was the inspiration for the rediscovery of my city. This waiter, whom I recognized after many years away from Peru, told me how he has survived the humiliation and hardship by smiling. Others manage to hold up their heads by silently making fun of the class that oppresses them, remembering with pride that they have survived both economic crisis and political terror from both sides. And some survive by entertaining car drivers with acrobatics, hoping for a few coins.

All my characters are first-class actors. Hardly any of them have ever been in a museum. Nor have they heard of Marcel Proust or Maria Callas; yet all the people you'll meet in OBLIVION are born poets.

OBLIVION doesn't scream at you, it whispers. OBLIVION doesn't sob; it just cries.

OVLIVION takes a flight over this forgotten city; like a bird it lands here, stops there, looks around, talks, listens, flies away again, and finally turns into a crystal ball that a young man keeps in perfect balance, thereby defying anonymity.



ABOUT HEDDY HONIGMANN



Heddy Honigmann, director © 2006 Cobos Films BV

Heddy Honigmann is considered one of the world's best documentary filmmakers. Her films (short & long fictions, short & long documentaries) have traveled all around the world receiving major awards and important retrospectives as in Toronto, the Museum of Modern Art in NY, Paris, Berlin, Minneapolis, Barcelona, Madrid, Valencia, Ontario, Utrecht, Grasz, Chicago, and Berkeley, among others.

She has also received many important awards for her body of work, such as the Hot Docs Outstanding Achievement Award

(2007), the San Francisco Film Society's Golden Gate Persistence of Vision Award (2007), the J. Van Praag Award from the Humanist Association (2005, Netherlands), the Jan Cassies Award for her whole oeuvre from the Dutch National Fund for Cultural Films for Television (2003, Netherlands).

In 2007, when she received the San Francisco Persistence of Vision Award, John Anderson (a regular contributor to *Newsday*, *The New York Times*, *Variety*, and the London *Guardian*), wrote the following about Hedy's work:

Heddy Honigmann Is Good for You

by John Anderson

At this year's Academy Awards, an incongruous Jerry Seinfeld introduced the nominees in the Best Documentary Feature category by calling them "the five extremely depressing films that are nominated for this award." Not the most agile joke, perhaps, but a lot of documentary people probably laughed out loud, as did any viewers with a sense of film history, and any sense of humor. They knew the line actually mocked what has come to be a profoundly passé stereotype: Nonfiction cinema may be good for you, but it is about as appetizing as medicine.

Heddy Honigmann is good for you. And her films are appetizing antidepressants. Penguins, fast food and fat guys in baseball caps all have been credited with raising the profile of the documentary in recent years, but these are aberrations, stupid pet tricks at the symphony. Among the real artists of nonfiction, Heddy is as responsible as anyone for raising the standards of doc-making worldwide. She flexes the form to meet her purposes, but never sacrifices style or integrity. She champions the dispossessed without sermonizing, and she injects just enough of herself in her films to give us a sense of the woman behind the movie without ever eclipsing the subject or the substance, the sense of space or the sense of place.

That her films are egoless makes them all the more precious.

This also means that Heddy may never win an Oscar, or even be nominated for one. But let's face it: She exists on a stratum too rarified for celebrity-driven industry awards or klieg-lit TV spectaculars. It is up to the likes of the San Francisco Film Society, and its Golden Gate Persistence of Vision Award, to honor the lifetime achievement of a woman who has taken us inside the hearts of subjects most other filmmakers would never have noticed.

Most other filmmakers, of course, would never have been capable of the delicately probing methods and sometimes heart-wrenching effects she's achieved. Consider **Crazy**, her 2001 film about U.N. soldiers who reminisce about hellish global conflicts and the music they listened to in order to stay sane. The film is a tightrope walk across an open wound—the lingering camera, the obvious pain and the vortex of memory create more tension than a week's worth of action thrillers—but neither the subjects nor their inquisitor ever lose their dignity. Or our attention.

In **The Underground Orchestra**, music again plays a central theme—as it often does in Heddy's films—but rather than being just a means of creative expression, it is the unifying element among immigrant street people of Paris, and the avenue by which Honigmann gets into her real themes of exile, inequality, disenfranchisement and personal histories. "I don't make films about subjects," she told an interviewer in 2001, "but about people." A simple, elegant, generous ethic, yet one that seems to elude about half the documentarians currently in circulation.

Born in Lima, Peru in 1951, Heddy trained as a filmmaker in Rome and has lived and worked in the Netherlands since 1978. It is said that love brought her to Amsterdam, and love has been the engine of her art—especially if one considers art a form of love. Heddy isn't particularly interested in railing against social inequities, despite the sense of political dissatisfaction one hears rumbling under her movies like a dyspeptic subway train. Rather, she is obsessed with the way people of often limited means deal with those inequities—through art, through love, through sex. Through memory. Through dance: For the expat Cubans who virtually oscillate through **Dame la Mano**, movement and music are a means of reconnection to community, culture and Havana. In this case it is the rumba—albeit a rumba performed in New Jersey—that provides the oblique arrow with which Honigmann pierces her target.

"Through the personal stories you get to the other backgrounds, the beauty, the power" she has said. "If you did it the other way round, a film would be too heavy, it would be unbearable." Via circuitous routes, Honigmann knows, we often arrive at truth.

But is truth enough for her? Are there gradations of truth? Degrees? Qualities? It is true that atrocities were committed in Bosnia during the war, but there is another truth achieved in **Good Husband, Dear Son**, in which Honigmann wades into Ahatovici to capture the grieving female voice of a town where 80 percent of the men are gone. It's true that Peru suffered economic collapse in the '90s, but there's another truth in the individual stories of the teachers, economists and housewives of **Metal and Melancholy** who turned into taxi drivers to make ends meet. And while it's true that we live in a culture of celebrity, death and celebrity death, the way Honigmann treats these matters in **Forever** is unlikely ever to be matched in tenderness, wit or ironic contemplation.

Heddy's films are elegantly composed, rich in precisely poetic imagery, fluid transitions and narrative flow. Ultimately, though, what one comes away feeling is the humanity, the empathy, the pouring out of hearts. Ask any theologian: What separates man from other animals? The same thing that distinguishes the work of Heddy Honigmann: Soul.

SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY

Oblivion (2008)
Forever (2006)
A Shetl that's no longer there & 11 other shorts of the series "Food for Love" (2004)
Dame la Mano (2003)
Good Husband, Dear Son (2001)
Private (2000)
Crazy (1999)
2 minutes of silence, please (1998)
The Underground Orchestra (1997)
O Amor Natural (1996)
Au Revoir (1995)
Metal and Melancholy (1992)
Mind Shadows (1987)
De Deur van het huis (1985)
De Witte Paraplu (1983)

CREDITS

with

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Luis Cerna
David Gutiérrez
Lucía Ruiz
Daniel Gutiérrez Grados
Adolfo Chávez
Mauro Gómez
and many others

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