

Bits

//// "The Arab Film Festival opened at the Clay Theatre on Thursday with a showing of 'Making Of,' a movie about...

//// "In the movie business, 28 years is several lifetimes, and that's why it's major news that Michael Lumpkin, programmer and...

//// "... a national competition called Campus Movie Fest [is billed as] "the world's largest student film festival," reports Justin Berton....

//// "San Jose resident Khaled Hosseini has led multiple professional lives: medical doctor, international bestselling novelist, envoy for the United Nations...

//// "YouTube, under increasing pressure to remove pirated television and movie clips from its popular video sharing site, introduced a filtering...

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Events

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The SF Film Society's annual showcase of new work from Italy opens with director Francesca Comencini in person for "Our...

Nov 8, 2007

The Embarcadero Film Center hosts the



Griddy realism: Jennifer Moss and friend stand with their backs to the wall in the suburban sprawl docu "Radiant City." (Photo by Donna Brunsdale, copyright Burns Film Ltd, courtesy Docfest)

Thursday: *Experience* /// SF Docfest, hitting you where you live (Sep 27, 2007)

By Robert Avila

Reality, generally considered over-rated by the moving-going public, is the unapologetic core of **SF DocFest** (Sept. 28-Oct. 10). But from its inception in 2001, SF Indie's (almost) annual documentary showcase (they skipped 2003) has eschewed the dry, serious, good-for-you associations which supposedly plague the genre, emphasizing the idiosyncratic, odd, outré, subcultural, even the sub-subcultural (cf. this year's attention-hound, "Wiener Takes All"); all the while slipping in some solid social and political fare when, so to speak, nobody's watching. These more substantive, high-fiber docs, however, can turn out to be among the best surprises, admirably contributing to a sum of films invariably stranger than mere fiction.

In this year's satisfying slew of urban, suburban, New Urban, anti-urban, and sprawl-mall films, the reality conceit is one that Canadian filmmakers Gary Burns and Jim Brown take for all it's worth. In their sleek and sly exposé of suburban dystopia, "Radiant City: A Documentary about Urban Sprawl," shades of Albert Brooks lurk in the Don DeLillo shadows that slowly gather around the real life of the Moss family, a seemingly typical suburban household whose customs and mores unfold before the documentarians' inquisitive camera with deftly understated humor, and in increasingly uncomfortable proximity to various personal problems and quirks.

As a self-effacing dad, control-freak mom, and their two kids (a wonderfully sardonic but good-natured brother and sister) provide freewheeling conversation regarding the attractions and drawbacks of track-home living, interviewed experts limn the logic and import of mushrooming suburban monocultures. Among the elites who plan, describe, bemoan, or otherwise sum up the environmental and existential reality of our protagonists, the snarky James Howard Kunstler (*The Geography of Nowhere*) intervenes with cool urban authority and words like cartoonification. "What you're seeing here," he explains, "is the greatest misallocation of resources in the history

San Francisco Film Society's 2nd San Francisco International Animation Festival, which opens with "The...

Oct 30, 2007

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of the world."

"Community," chimes another suburbia watcher, "is shorthand for cluster of houses with people inside them not talking to each other."

But today's inhabitants of suburbia are knowing subjects, with a philosophical approach to its tradeoffs -- one sometimes laced with ironic detachment as they navigate the gridlocked expressways, empty sidewalks, and anonymous inward-facing abodes of this middle-class world. As still another commentator notes, these people know the critique of suburbia backwards and forwards yet choose to live there anyway. Life, so to speak, goes on. The Moss boy climbs to the top of a cell phone tower to narrate the view into a digicam. Mom meticulously arranges the magnets on the family's detailed refrigerator calendar. Kids in a dirt lot play "Escape from Mexico" with paintball guns. And Dad spends free time in rehearsals for an amateur production of a musical -- about suburbia! -- that he found on the Internet. ("It's kind of like Stephen Sondheim meets 'Rocky Horror Picture Show' meets 'The Simpsons,'" he offers.)

Sure, life goes on. But for how long? "Radiant City" has a pretty straightforward answer for all its genre-bending. Part of it comes along in some unhealthy statistics that show up in animated inter-title sequences (including the slightly brow-raising fact that traffic accidents and deaths are three times more common in the suburbs than in the inner city). More crucially, though, and as an urban planner explains, suburban sprawl fundamentally resists the regeneration and evolution allowed, in contrast, by the grid-patterned density of cities. In the face of peak oil, and other major economic downshifts considered just around the corner, car-dependent suburbia's stifling pods and cul-de-sacs form part of an overall design so precariously rigid that (as the informed consensus here makes plain) it is thoroughly doomed. "This way of living," Kunstler certifies, "is coming off the menu."

Several other docs in this year's lineup provide some glimpse of the alternatives. At the extreme end, try Jeremy and Randy Stulberg's fascinating "Off the Grid: Life on the Mesa" (2007), a beautifully made portrait of a loose-knit community of new American pioneers -- a mix of radicals, old hippies, eccentric loners, addled and ailing Gulf War vets, and teenage runaways subsisting in the New Mexican desert at the fringes of American civilization. In this punishing but gorgeous landscape, freedom and bare survival depend on a few basic unwritten laws of cooperation and self-defense. "We don't dial 9-1-1. We dial 3-5-7: Three-fifty-seven magnum." Definitely not the grid, this isn't Burning Man either.

"New Urban Cowboy: The Labors of Michael E. Arth" (2007) stakes out some middle ground between suburban wasteland and Mad Max-style desert-dwelling in the pretty astounding tale of artist and New Urbanism developer, builder, and visionary Michael Arth. After some impressive background on a charmed life, the film (by Arth and Blake Wiers) tirelessly documents Arth's bold project, beginning in 2001, to utterly transform a Florida slum, DeLand's infamous Garden District, into a vibrant eco-friendly community that downplays car culture (in his own version of New Urbanism, which he calls New Pedestrianism). The story is gripping throughout, except perhaps for a sequence that indulges a better-homes-and-garden tour of his neighbors' refurbished houses -- but by then he's definitely earned it.

But what will cities, and not just suburbs like Arth's Garden District, look like in the aftermath of abundant, semi-affordable oil? Turns out we already know. By necessity, Cuba has retooled for a (largely) oil-free world, and the outcome as evidenced in "The Power of Community: How Cuba Survived Peak Oil" (2006) is surprisingly hopeful. In fact, the dire economic crisis Cuba entered after the collapse of the Soviet Union has led in a remarkably short time to a more de-centralized, ecologically sustainable society that looks far

saner than the giant, transportation-heavy systems of production and consumption made possible by fossil fuels.

Back home, the fight for comparable forms of community continues in a distinctly American evangelical vernacular. This year's festival leads off with one of the more righteous attacks on runaway consumerism and the malling of America, "What Would Jesus Buy?" Co-produced by Morgan Spurlock ("Super Size Me"), Rob VanAlkemade's road film (a super-sized adaptation of his award-winning short, "Preacher With an Unknown God") follows Reverend Billy (Bill Talen) and his fellow activist-performers in the Church of Stop Shopping (including the first-rate Stop-Shopping Choir and Not Buying It band) as they trek cross-country in the annual "shopping-days" countdown to Christmas. Their mission is nothing less than to save Americans from the Shopocalypse, and by promoting a gift economy over a consumer one, to restore the "true meaning of Christmas" with some old-time direct action in the houses of the beast (including Starbucks, Wal-Mart, the Mall of America, and, of course, Disneyland). A revealing and rousing portrait of serious but joyful activism against the community-destroying forces of global capitalism, opening night's screening will be blessed with the presence of the Reverend Billy himself, so come ready to be healed.

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