



*A Sense of Detail*

By YANN-OLIVIER WICHT

**DONIGAN CUMMING**

**CONTROLLED  
DISTURBANCE**

## ÉTATS DES LIEUX – DONIGAN CUMMING

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### A SENSE OF DETAIL

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With his independent, self-sufficient production method, Donigan Cumming is not pledged to any system; thus for seven years he has been freely developing a collection of strong and personal films. As of his early films, the film-maker deliberately abandoned all compositional orthodoxy, staking out his interest in the world on a different scale. He films exclusively with a small DV camera. His lens, as a mobile extension of his arm, almost turns into a magnifying glass as it delves into reality, coming excessively close to the faces and bodies until the viewer is made to feel uneasy. This exploration of reality beyond conventional framing patterns challenges and shocks us because it seems to lead to inequality in the exchange between the director and his characters. Yet to describe the film-maker's relationship with his models as unhealthy or disrespectful leads one to neglect the fact that Cumming makes his films with his characters and not without their knowing, and that he builds his narratives as much around spontaneously captured scenes as carefully-staged situations. No, this atypical choice of compositional style with very large close-ups, of a sometimes harsh duration, is not a mark of irreverence but rather an intense reassertion of the very power of the frame.

In each of his films the function of decentering, the force of distortion of bodies and space and the break effects in the editing oblige the viewer to get involved in the narrative. In contrast to the audiovisual wholesalers who want to produce meaning without stimulating a questioning process they consider superfluous, Cumming always produces detail. His work is not that of an objective investigator, he never gets involved on the side of an explanation or a demand. He prefers to accumulate clues, signs and to deliver an abrupt, raw recording of reality. The dramaturgy of his films never specifies the context in which his protagonists move. The city and the society that surround these people without considering their distress are not shown. While society tends to exclude these marginal characters from its field of vision, while the dramas or delights of their lives are ignored, Cumming's camera, in contrast, deliberately rejects any representation of the so-called normal world. Thus he keeps reality in its opacity and complexity, punctuates his narratives with moments of clarity and incomprehension, of synchronicity and phase shifting, of sympathy and disgust. This strong cinematographic gesture, which the viewer feels unconsciously, tends to confine the latter's own reality to off-camera. The borderline which the film-maker draws between his characters and society - with which we would tend to identify - prompts us to involve our own affects. When faced with partial images, we are forced to bridge the gap, and we then summon up our prejudices about one person's alcoholism and another's poverty. The certainty of our beliefs is shaken, we feel unsettled.

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What is more, Cumming's films upset the conventional codes of documentary films. For this director, filming the world does not simply mean documenting it or turning it into fiction. Above all, it means documenting its fictionalization. Following on from Jean Rouch, he accepts that the starting-point of a sequence may be fictitious provided that the situation reveals its flaw as time wears on, thus attaining a transcendent degree of truth. However, he breaks with the convention established by Rouch by turning his own person into a character of the film. Although he does not play systematically on his own presence in the images, we regularly hear his own questions and advice as a voice-over; this is how he reveals the nature of the situation-staging work in which he engages with his group of characters. Exploiting the codes of conventional film as well, he makes fun of certain archetypes of genre cinema - such as the western, the thriller, and the comedy -, exacerbates these structures and waits until they break up of their own accord. When editing, he stresses certain scenes by means of excerpts of music from great Hollywood films; the excerpts then play like the broken springs of a certain form of cinema. Far removed from the beautiful stories and a standardized world, in which we all aspire to be the actors, there are these bodies encountered on the fringe of mainstream society. When revealed by Donigan Cumming's eye, this strange troupe of invisible people who have been defeated by life begins to haunt our guilty conscience.