

MEGACITIES

Two texts by Ginu Kamani

(Page 23: »HIDDEN CAMERA« A Home Movie – Written and Directed by Ginu Kamani)

I am a recalcitrant filmmaker. After three years as a producer of concisely edited advertising films, I grew reluctant to interrupt flow. Rushes from my unedited documentaries amaze me again and again as records of each unimaginable shooting day.

A film shoot is a world within a world, a maze inside a maze. The finished film product is only one stop on the magical mystery tour. My producer's brain was on fire as I watched Megacities on the cinema screen in April 2001. I was riveted and exhausted imagining the shooting set ups in Dharavi and Govandi. I was jealous at not knowing the background stories.

Filmmakers have the best stories. Really weird ones. A film shoot often demands nothing less than a ransacking of the known universe.

The stamina of a director will often wane on a shoot that starts with intense engagement--one can see it in the finished film. Megacities never lets up. The director's stamina never lets up. Michael obviously had a lot of fun shooting this film. I was jealous at not having seen the rushes.

I interviewed Michael for the first time in Vienna on December 26, 2002. I was basically there to hear him talk, to engage his story breath. I am attuned to very many different kinds of Englishes, and the reinvention of the language in the mouth of a non-native speaker brings on particular delight. Michael's long, fluid story breaths dissolved any formalities of the interview format into an inclusive conversation, still ongoing four years later.

The unedited transcript of our first meeting re-invokes multiple pleasures large and small. Looking back over this opening exchange I'm most pleased to confirm that it's so totally him.

Ginu Kamani

Interview with Michael Glawogger, Vienna Dec 26, 2002

GK: OK, you should say that again...

MG: What was actually your question because we were talking about attracting attention...

GK: Yes. I know that any kind of film crew in India is obviously going to attract attention. I was actually thinking in terms of—at your hotel—whether people knew what you were doing.

MG: I think so, I think so, but they didn't know actually where we were shooting, and what exactly we were doing because, even my production manager—I mean, they know about Dharavi and Govandi but actually they would never go there, and it took them a while until they went with me. I went first, and without translators, because they thought I'm crazy. Then they found it quite amazing, and it's something that occurs to me quite often, that when you go to a place like that, that after a few weeks, you've seen places that the locals have never been to, and in India it was the most extreme—everybody talks about these places, everybody knows about them but they actually don't go there, they live sometimes like two or three corners away, and with these two or three corners everything changes so much, the class changes, maybe the caste changes, and they don't mingle. Especially in Govandi, which is nowadays an even more extreme place than Dharavi because Dharavi is starting to get structure, and structure is a—in a political sense and in a sense of being a city within the city—and it's become a way wealthier place than the outskirts. But still, they've never been there before, and they were quite amazed by the place.

GK: But how did you manage without translators?

MG: Well, it was just like the first days of walking through, I checked [the hire of] a cab, a bike, and they told me No and everyone was staring at me, I was quite amazed.

GK: It's become structured for quite some years now, people have solid living spaces now instead of just—

MG: Not only that, there are enterprises where rich Indians sit there and you can buy how many bags worth of whatever you like at a cheap price, so that's actually an interesting place because you go through a lot of change—you can watch it become a wealthy place because everybody is working very hard and they're doing business with international companies.

GK: I have a friend from Bombay who grew up on the outskirts of Dharavi, but they would never say where they lived.

MG: It's also sometimes hard to tell. I could only find my way by remembering where to turn and where to go, and where is this shop, then you have to turn left...specially if you don't speak the language, and even if you do speak the language, the street names are not really there.

GK: So then you were saying that you never attracted so much attention in your life, right?

MG: Ya, because the first—when I found this guy I always call the many-colored man, we were approaching him and told him about shooting, and he wouldn't really understand. We went there every day, like we normally do, that's sort of the method I'm using, I go there again and again and sit down with the people and have tea or whatever, it's a normal process of becoming friendly with somebody. Finally he understood what we wanted and he agreed, and his boss agreed, and only because we went there often. I heard of many film types who were doing reportages and got kicked out of the place, or they didn't, like, stay there for long. And the first day we came there with the camera, and this was a story that happened again and again, the kid that shouted 'Shooting, shooting!'—that was sort of our joke during the shoot, and within minutes there were like 500 or a 1000 people around us, and all my cameraman could see was the little button on the first kid standing close to the camera—it was next to impossible to do it. Especially in Govandi it got sort of out of hand, or almost dangerous when we shot the train sequence because all the people gathered around the train tracks, and I was getting really scared, and I was running around carrying kids and carrying people out of the image or out of danger, and they just grew back like jungle. And still, if you watch carefully, there are shots when somebody works in a little shop and the train passes by, in the background you can see 500 people standing and watching. So especially with this sequence, and with shooting in Govandi, I did not get more than three takes a day. Mostly I was trying to get the shot clear. And also, like, in the train, you could never shoot in a not-prepared compartment because it's so full of people that you wouldn't see much. So actually, here—because you said your theme is like the crossover between fiction and documentary—here I actually hired fifty extras to fill up a compartment and then when you see the shot with all the women holding up [the handles], that's completely staged because I could probably never do it—you can do it with smaller equipment, but not the way I shoot.

GK: Or, I guess with a hidden camera, that would be the only other option.

MG: But Dharavi's sort of a magic place for me especially with the guy with the movie thing [the bioscope man], because on the very first day I was in Bombay I saw him in a completely different district. So I asked my people in Bombay if this is a common thing, and they said, Ya, these people exist, and I said, Okay, get me one. And it was a complete disaster because nobody found anyone, and actually I found that there is only one guy, so I said, Okay, this is a city of what—I don't know—17 million? Find him! And they even thought about hiring a detective or something. One week after walking around Dharavi, the guy just walked across the street again! And I said, Okay, here he is, and then I ran after him and explained to him, and he said, Yes, I'd be honored, I'll be in your movie, no problem, and he gave an address. And I was pretty satisfied, and we came home and showed it to our production manager and he looked at this and said, Ya, that's great, but it's not in Bombay, and it doesn't say where it is, it's just a street name! And so we found out that the guy gave us his address but it's somewhere in the province and he didn't write down where. So he was lost again. So I talked to many people in Dharavi, do they know this guy, yeah, they said they know this guy, then we found a little

hut along the train tracks, and there was a friend of his, a completely fucked-up guy only drinking country liquor and all that, said, Ya, the guy comes like every other month to Bombay to make some money and goes home, and I don't know when he comes back. And then, after like two weeks, I met him a third time, and I said, Okay, Stay here, and he said, No, no, I've made my money for the week, I'm going home. He agreed to be there on, I think—in three weeks, on Thursday, at 2. I said, No, no, he's never gonna be there. But he actually was. If you think of the place and you know the quantity of people and whom you see in a city like that, it was sort of magic that I met this guy three times by chance, so he had to be in the film. But then the biggest thing was—I thought of these films stitched together as, sort of, the perfect experimental movie, and then I tried to convince him to give me this roll of film to make a print of it. He said, Never, ever. So, I don't know how we did it, but we managed somehow, maybe he even went to the lab with us to control it, and get it back, because it's his income, if he doesn't get back the roll of film, he's out.

GK: So, when you landed up in Bombay, what did you actually know that you were going to shoot?

MG: Nothing. I had never been in India, I was like any other tourist or anybody, I was arriving there at three o'clock in the morning. We drove to the city and I saw all these people sleeping in the streets. The next day I saw for the first time in my life that everybody shits in the streets, and yeah, so... It's also a fact that occurs to you—and in India it was the most amazing—that on the first day of the shoot you are there, and it's really sort of, Huh, this is also this planet, this is also all that I don't know, and then after a week you think, this is all so common, what should I shoot here? But that's sometimes a very constructive moment because then you start to look closer and you start to choose places where you want to go, so I strolled around, the very first morning, I couldn't sleep and I didn't know the place where I lived—I don't know the name of the quarter—but I took a long stroll at about seven o'clock in the morning and one of the first places I went was Sasoon Dock, so that was like a...a real experience, a real place. I went there again two years ago, and it's an amazing place, it almost looks medieval—the way the ships look, the way the people look, if you've never seen it, it's quite an amazing place. And it stinks like hell!

GK: So, you knew that you wanted something in India, and it was in your budget, somehow, but you didn't know what you would shoot.

MG: Exactly. That was sort of the concept of the film—it's very rare, maybe, in every filmmaker's career, that you get some money where they say, this has a theme [waiter interrupts] I think we have to get out of here...so, so, with this movie I could go to any place I want, any city I want, and there I could start walking around and finding things—like in Dharavi I walked around a corner and saw a man that's all yellow, and I thought, Well, this could be something I'm interested in. So, it was all by chance, all by luck.

GK: Did you know which cities beforehand, or...?

MG: I did, but only two of them, and after shooting Mexico and India, which I actually wanted to because they are, in a different way, the biggest cities, which is always relative—Mexico is the most spread out place and it always feels like a huge village, and it never stops and ends, but you never see a lot of people, and in Bombay it's very different because it's a half-island, it's sort of an implosion, there are people everywhere, always, and I had to get used to that—you are always touched by people, always, always. All my co-workers started to take my hand when walking around, everybody touches you, and at first you're a little...being a European you are a little, like, what is this all about—but then you get used to it, it's quite nice, it's a friendly place in a way, but it takes some time till you realize that there's also aggression flowing underneath and I wouldn't want to know how it feels when it's coming out, I mean, it's a strange place, and if you ask me of all the places I've been for this movie, I probably know the least about India still, because you're welcome, you're treated well, but you're not easily let in. It's something very different to a place like Russia, where it's sort of the opposite—there you're treated like shit in the beginning, and you're shouted at, but if after a while, if they accept it, they let you in. But in India I hardly ever had this feeling.

GK: Well, there are also class issues, I mean I don't know how many wealthy Indians you came into contact with...

MG: Of course I did, I did also come across wealthy Indians but that's different everywhere. When it comes

down to how people really react to you, I don't have to meet a, let's say an Indian that behaves like a European, which actually there are also. Normally with lower class people, you know pretty well how people react—they're very polite, they invite you to their house, they give you food. But, if you watch *Megacities*, there is rarely a personal moment about India—it was in a way not so easy for me. In that sense, two months is a short time [to spend there].

GK: Well, I can imagine other issues. I've shot in India and I know that if your production people, for example, are uncomfortable, then your film subjects will know that.

MG: Oh well, that's everywhere. I keep them out of it. I got a little...almost a boy, who looked very boyish but wasn't a boy, he was about 20 years old and he had a good way with people and he got accepted, but when they run around with cell phones and people know what's going on, then they're even nicer to a foreigner than those people, and that's not specific about India, that's everywhere. If you go to Harlem or to the Bronx, they would be like, an American that comes there as a hotshot and with nice shoes and [...]

GK: So, if there were a personal moment from India, what would it have looked like?

MG: Well, I think there are some, with Babu Khan, the many-colored man, he sort of opened up and talked about himself, but I had very little talking in the film. Babu Khan was sort of the only bitter man I have in the film because I always said that the film was about the beauty of people and I never wanted it to be so tragic. The whole thing that I experienced—that these places, Dharavi or Govandi, they are very lively places and they are very very different to what people expect, they are very different from what people show of them. You always find somebody who says, Oh my god, I'm so poor, everything is poor, everybody's drinking, but that's not the normal thing, and Babu Khan was a strange man, and he [we?] often thought that he was a bitter man. He's a strange character. But with him I had these moments—they're not in the film—when he started to realize what we're doing and what this is all about, and he was there two years ago and I brought him pictures of the movie and he was quite proud of it, but I never gave him a tape because—actually, we gave him a tape, but my Indian colleagues edited out the Cassandra part, because they said it would offend the Muslim man very much.

GK: Yeah, it may offend him, but he may also visit women like that, so it's a different issue.

MG: That's not for me to decide, but I trust them on this. I wouldn't want him to be offended.

GK: So, all your subjects got to see the film?

MG: Not all the time—not because I wouldn't want to show the film, but the film is so spread out over the world, like Mikey in New York I never found him again, so I cannot spend a month running after people and trying to show them the film, but whenever I have a chance, I'm very pleased to show them the film. I showed it to Cassandra and she was quite proud of it, so whenever we have the chance... Like, when I do a film here, we always make it a priority to invite the people to the premiere, but with this movie it just wasn't always possible.

GK: You were not using a video assist?

MG: It's a mixture of things—I mean, the way I shoot a film like that is quite old-fashioned. I use film, I use a small crew, and I try to make the money I have go into the actual film. With every piece of equipment, you have to use another person, and I have a built-up relationship with my cameraman, I look through the camera a lot, I take my time, I shoot slow.

*GK: You didn't shoot *Megacities*?*

MG: No.

GK: But you shot—

MG: I shot for Ulrich [Seidl], I shot for myself, I made a tv movie—I do that sometimes—but also, I take a lot of influence—I know what a film should look like, it's framed almost like a feature film, and we do that very carefully.

GK: And apparently people are confused by this. Your audiences are confused by this.

MG: Yes, they are sometimes, because they have a lot of preconceptions of how a documentary should, or has to, look. I have to honestly say that I get more and more bored by it because you think about it, and you reflect on what they say, and the issue has sort of passed. If you think about it, every documentary filmmaker has a different degree of altering or of looking at reality, and it's always a question of degree—how far do I go. I always explain it with the New York sequence about the hustler—you never ever could shoot something like this in a documentary film, so you have two choices, either you do it with a hidden camera, which I find profoundly immoral: I would never do it; or you stage it, and if you stage it, you do so to a certain degree. So I took this hustler, I took Mike and I stood with him on the corner and I looked at the people that came by, and what they looked like, and what were his marks, which were the people from among whom he could find a trick, and then I held a big casting in New York and I said to everybody, Look, if you want to work a day for me, you have to know a lot of improv, and I'm not going to tell you what it's all about, you come around the corner with the camera, and you go with whatever happens. So, to a degree, those people also didn't know what was going to happen. And it almost looks like what it looked like when I saw him really do it. So, if you alter reality by being there with the camera, then you always alter it. So, if you set the degree to an extent higher where you can show such a thing, it's never ever going to be exactly like it is in reality, but what is? I mean, nobody sits in front of the camera and talks to the director—that's a very strong alteration of reality too! So I think it should be in the hands of the filmmaker to say how far he goes, and I think you have to build up trust between you and the audience, so that they accept it. And if somebody's there who says, You're a liar, you're a cheater, that's not the way it is, I can do nothing, I can say, Well, I never ever shot anything that I didn't see. Sometimes I have to re-do it, re-stage it, it's not so much different from every other documentary, where somebody says, Come on, do it again, because we didn't get it.

GK: I don't think it's a problem so much for filmmakers, but I think because audiences don't understand the process, they're so much focused on the product.

MG: But the people who I would say understood, or took the film the way it is, they always say they had a very strong feeling of authenticity, and of the truth. I'm way more interested in moments of truth than moments which are "captured"—because I think you can capture a football game or a war, but you may never capture private moments: that sense that you're there and you can feel it. If you're in a small room and somebody robs some other person or even if there's a private conversation between a couple, that's not, in that sense, "documentary" filmmaking—that if you're there it will happen anyway—the football game, yes, the war, yes, but this, no. So, there's always alteration, especially from the moment when you're there with a camera.

GK: Well, I think the visual requires alteration for the brain to begin to understand how to see.

MG: Yes, and also it should, because I mean, it's not that reality itself is always the most interesting thing on earth—there should also be artistic input and there should be the filmmaker who is obviously there and who alters this reality in that sense that he shows it the way he sees it. I think that's what filmmaking is about. If someone wants to see Dharavi, they should go there, it's no way to watch my movie, that's the Dharavi that I see, that I can offer—it's not a reflection of this place in the sense that I would reflect the total reality of that place, which would be completely impossible.

GK: There seem to be two issues here which are very difficult, one is that the director is responsible for everything. For me it's actually very interesting why people complain about this.

MG: I don't think that, actually, because I think that the people you work with on a film like that, or the people who are your protagonists, they are so strong in their way of holding against you, because they are what they are, that it never could only be my image of that, but it's always me meeting them with a camera.

GK: For the audience, for people who complain that you're framing it as a feature—that it becomes entirely your

responsibility somehow—well, poverty first of all shouldn't look so beautiful, right? It shouldn't be such a pleasing image, so there's the first confusion...

MG: That always makes me smile, because if the place wouldn't have beauty in itself, it's not possible for me to make it look beautiful, I don't use beauty filters! I mean, the guy who painted his little movie theater, made it in a very delicate and careful and beautiful way, and people enjoy what he's doing, and that makes the beauty of it. Just because you do your work [as a filmmaker] carefully and frame it properly, that doesn't make it less real. I think these issues are actually quite simple, I mean, if you try to find, in terms of cinematography, images that fit the people and the situation, then things become beautiful or ugly, but it's not you making them beautiful or ugly.

GK: You've probably had to deal with this quite a bit with the film, right? Accusations of aestheticizing of poverty?

MG: I did, and I did not, because this film has had very little mediocre response—people get very, very emotional about this film, and I never had any discussion after a film viewing that took less than two hours because people want to know so much, and the film shows things, but is not there to answer things. When the film's over, it's always a little quiet, and then people start to spill over, and sometimes I started just watching these discussions, because somebody in the audience was getting so furious about the movie and then another got up and shouted to him what a beautiful film this is and then they started discussing, and I had to say nothing more. And sometimes I answer a lot of questions.

GK: Did you know that you were going to make such an emotional film? Was that your intent, what you were hoping for?

MG: Maybe the film is more naïve than that because it was a film I made to get to know more about the world, in this sense. So as I said, I walked cities, I met people, I made friends, and I tried to show them in a proper way, and people got emotional about it, so it was fine with me. It was not so much a film, because it doesn't have a proper theme—actually it has a theme, but the theme is almost an excuse, because it didn't have that—it was open and vulnerable, but at the same time always curious about things. Maybe that's why people became so emotional about it.

GK: I think the issue of it being open and vulnerable actually becomes one of the most difficult things about a piece of art—that if people interact with it and are left feeling open and vulnerable, then that's the first sign that something has gone wrong, rather than that something has gone right.

MG: It's also a concept of how you see the world. You can make the film, and say: You go out there and if you want to say something about the world, then you'll find it. That works, that happens, and that's how a lot of films are made. I'm in a very extreme way not doing this—I think film is not made for this. You want to do that, write an essay, write a book, be a journalist, do whatever you want, but film can only do so much, film has very specific kinds of colors and techniques, and if you use them, you're not writing an essay—you leave language out, or sometimes you leave language. When you need it, you'll use it, but it's only one little part of what you can use. This is a method that I'm really using very consciously. A lot of people say, Why doesn't this film have a commentary? Why don't you take a position? But if you look closely, it has a position, because when the Mexican comic book figure writes a letter to the world, it's a sort of a commentary that was made between him and me. And when I use a piece of Russian literature as a voice-over when somebody reads a book, then it's not just any page that I use, it's a commentary, but it's sort of hidden.

GK: Well, any edited piece of footage already has a built-in commentary, but again I think there is a problem with how much audiences understand of film process.

MG: They don't have to, I think, a film either works or not, and I sometimes suffer that people who watch movies like that are so, so conscious of how they think a film should be made. I have very often said, If you want the film about...because many people say why didn't you do a film on the many-colored man, he's interesting enough for a whole movie, and I always say, Go there, I'll give you the address, it's there to make, the reality didn't stop, it's in your capability to do that. I recently did a film about the political situation in

Austria, where I hitchhiked for three weeks through the country, and all I did was getting into cars with people, put the microphone on their security belt, filming them while driving and them talking about the political situation in Austria, and the second kind of shot that I did was moving pictures of landscape. And there was one guy in the film—after people saw it, they called me, Could we use this guy for a TV show, and I said, Of course you can, it's somebody who's still there, this kind of reality doesn't stop.

GK: When did you know how you wanted to make films—the style of the films...

MG: I do a lot of different kinds of films. At the moment I'm working on a sit com. I always say there are two kinds of filmmakers—one who does the same film all his life, and I think that's very appropriate, and normally those people achieve even more because they do it better and better, because they put a certain scheme over different issues and that is a very good method. I myself, and also I see the works of many other directors, get sometimes bored of that, and they try to find different ways—at the moment I'm doing a film that's very close to the work I did on Megacities, I'm preparing a sitcom, and I finished a comedy that you could call a mixture between a European and an American independent movie, so I'm trying very different fields.

GK: Who are some of the other directors or other films that you are very pleased by, or have been influenced by?

MG: That's sometimes hard to say. It's not that I could say, this filmmaker only, or this film—it's almost more moments in movies. I think of Vertov's work and The Man With the Movie Camera—it's so direct documentary, but at the same time it has a very poetic feel, which I am always after too, a very sensual feel, how you work with music, and things like that. I remember a moment in a Goddard movie where a woman working in a factory says, Oh my God, why have you left me. I could talk about those moments, but I can also enjoy going to Lord of the Rings.

[break, change location]

GK: So you went to the San Francisco Art Institute and you were told to smoke a joint and go get naked on the beach.

MG: That's an influence...

GK: I hope so, you'd be crazy to pass that up!

MG: Actually, this school was quite an influence, because I saw so many films that are still valuable to me. Especially at that time, experimental filmmaking was something where you could touch the material, I still remember stuff like this in that Stan Brakhage footage there's grass and leaves and butterflies directly on the film, I always liked that kind of stuff—to be able to hold this film, to touch it, all this I liked, and there were many films that maybe are more influential to me than a lot of straightforward filmmaking. Things you can only do with film that are purely sensual—I like that. And that's sort of the leftover from these times of watching movies. The time I spent there, I didn't shoot that many films, because I couldn't afford it, we all had to pay ourselves it was like an art college, it was not in that sense that you learned the craftsmanship of filmmaking, but it was important.

GK: So what did you see there besides Stan Brakhage?

MG: We had a history class on experimental filmmaking, so we saw and heard about everything they had—I even got acquainted there with Peter Kubelka's work—he is actually Austrian, and he's an amazing filmmaker, so if you were to ask me about filmmakers in Austria, I would name him as important. Kubelka, he's sort of an icon in experimental filmmaking.

GK: So what about Austrian film?

MG: I think Austria has developed quite a strong identity in documentary filmmaking within the last 20 years, and especially documentary films made for the movie theater which nobody actually believes exists. While I was shooting in the Ukraine, I always told people I'm doing a film for movie theaters, and they wouldn't belie-

ve that anybody would go see a documentary film, and why do you do that, it's a complete strange thing to do. And, there are hardly any movie theaters anymore. So, I think that a lot of Austrian films, especially in documentary filmmaking, are quite unique. And there is money, money to make these films.

GK: From where?

MG: From government funds, mostly. Megacities, for example is a two-country co-production, government-funded television movie—the normal thing...a little European community money... But I'm not an expert to give you an overview of Austrian filmmaking—at the moment it's doing quite well, a lot of films are acknowledged at festivals. More or less in feature film production we have two ways of film making, one is completely oriented to the Austrian Box Office, which hardly works anymore with Germany in terms of language, in terms of humor and comedy—which works in Austria and which does very, very well, even better than some American blockbusters because people like to have their own comedies; and the other is purely artistic work which mainly goes to festivals. In the last year there were two or three films, like Ulrich Seidl's film *Hundstage* [Dog Days] which did well at the box office and on the festival circuit.

GK: You made a comment about the films not doing well in Germany?

MG: It's more or less always a language problem—we speak the same language but Austrian German is very different, especially if it's local, Viennese, and the humor is also very different.

GK: Do the Austrians have a better sense of humor?

MG: I wouldn't judge that. Maybe, yes. I think it's not as stiff.

GK: When you are a superior civilization you have a lot of burdens to carry, including, perhaps, a truncated sense of humor.

MG: Maybe.

GK: We have the same problem in India, you know, where on the surface people don't want to admit to Indian things being funny, but underneath everyone's laughing their heads off. They just don't want to talk about it.

GK: Is the government involved with distribution or only with funding?

MG: Also with distribution because in Austria there is a law that every film that is government-funded has to be distributed.

GK: Wow.

MG: Even if it's one print in one movie theater, they have to give you money for that.

GK: And do they also extend this to video release?

MG: You get an amount of money for distribution, for the distributor, and whatever he does with it is his choice, so he can also take out the film on video.

[change of side]

MG: He can take out a loan to make more prints if he believes the film will be a huge commercial success, but there is a certain amount of money he gets to distribute the film.

GK: Are you aware of other countries doing this or is Austria unique in this?

MG: Maybe unique, but I'm not the right person to ask these questions. I could give you names who could tell you better, I'm a filmmaker, I know my end of the story and I know basics about it, and I've been on the jury

for giving money, but I'm not an expert.

GK: There is a film school here...

MG: Oh yes, I've been to it.

GK: Let's return to Megacities...how much footage ended up not being used—were there actual cities that you didn't use?

MG: No. Actually I had planned a fifth city, but it's sort of a process—in the first city, you don't know your film yet, so I decided instead of adding a fifth city, to go back to Mexico City and make the material I shot there more complex in terms of what I did—I ended up not using all of what I did in Mexico because I didn't know my own film so well at that time. Sometimes with a film like that it takes some time until you get the feel for it, and until you know what you're doing, so I did some re-shooting and completions on the Mexican part instead of a fifth city, and well, the film had a quite normal ratio for a documentary like that, 1:20, 1:25, something like that.

GK: So, how did you find Cassandra?

MG: Actually I found her with Ulrich Seidl—those were the first research trips that we made for this film and we saw this theater from outside and we went in there—

GK: So that was the actual theater where she performs.

MG: Yes, and we liked the performance, so we sort of went there every other night and I returned two years later, I think, to shoot the film and then do the basic research again, and it was still there. Cassandra was new at that time and I watched her performance a couple of times and then I approached one of these women and asked her to participate.

GK: Was Seidl involved with Megacities?

MG: He did photographs.

GK: So you trade jobs with each other.

MG: We did, at some point of our lives. I was his assistant for many films, and I shot some stuff for him and he worked on some of my films until we got caught up in our own projects to the extent that we couldn't do that anymore. But we did a lot together.

GK: Did you start out together?

MG: In a way...

GK: Back to Cassandra. That sequence in the film was just amazing. When I saw that film I knew I had to talk to you—when I saw that sequence in the film, because it feels completely unreal to me. When I heard that in this film you were asking people to stage their lives, that became the question for me—like, how much of that is the performance as it exists, and how much did you have to work again?

MG: There are two sequences in the film that are not staged at all, or only to a minimal extent, and one is the drunk tank in Moscow and the other is Cassandra. Not all of this public—I mean, I could not shoot the sequence at an actual performance because it would invade the privacy of the men. So what I actually did is I made a little flyer saying that we would do a free show, and whoever doesn't mind being filmed can come without paying for it, and more or less the same crowd came that enjoyed Cassandra normally, so she did her show and we filmed it, but we never even asked her to re-do anything—it's shot during one performance.

GK: How many cameras were you using?

MG: One.

GK: *Sorry, being a producer, I was trying to figure out how you did it, because it looked like you had different cameras that you were using.*

MG: No, it takes quite a long time, because when she's down there, with all of them sucking on her and such, it takes a while, so you have time to re-place the camera. It's a show—what's not in the movie is that they sometimes even play little scenes—it's a boulevard theater, I mean Cassandra is even a member of the artists—

GK: *What was that?*

MG: Boulevard—how do you say that—like if there's a Broadway show and it's completely comedy and light—Boulevard, we call it in Europe.

GK: *Uh...burlesque?*

MG: Burlesque. Actually, that's what it's called in Spanish too, that's what it is.

GK: *Well, it's a little bit more intense than—*

MG: It's a little bit more intense, but that's what they call it, that's how they advertise it. It's called burlesque.

GK: *Sitting in the theater watching that sequence, it was like, absolute stunned silence, I mean in the States we're not used to seeing that kind of theater!*

MG: Actually, if you go there—I'm not a big aficionado of theater, but I always liked to go there because I think it says a lot, it says a lot without words, it says a lot about capitalism, it says a lot about male-female relationships in a society like that, it says a lot about how sometimes this can also be, in a way, religious, it says a lot about—I sometimes pity the men who do that, being down there, grabbing up at her—it says a lot about how they, sort of, in a way, think she's something like a holy mother or something, it says that she enjoys it, and at the same time sometimes thinks it's gross and appalling. There's a lot in there. And also with this corny music, I mean I chose one of the songs that is used for the performance. Sometimes it's a Madonna song, sometimes it's Seven Seconds, it's whatever is modern, and this is a very popular song by a Spanish guy, something like Julio Iglesias or something, a pretty corny song, so I took one of those songs that she uses. But the whole thing is actually really a theater, with a couple of shows everyday, and Cassandra is a member of the actors' union of Mexico City, and she sees herself as an actor.

GK: *She is. She is definitely one of the most amazing actors I have ever seen.*

MG: She was never embarrassed by these shots. I showed her pictures and said, Well, a lot of people all over the world have seen this—she was never against it. She wondered about us, why we do this and stuff, but she was never against it.

GK: *For that sequence alone I would like to show your film where I teach, because I teach in a women's college, and this is the kind of work that is never permitted because instructors wouldn't know what to say—how do you present this, how do you frame it for the students, you know—wealthy middle class students come to the college. That's the kind of challenge I get very interested in. Since I've read hardly any reviews of the film, was that part of the film a particular issue for anybody?*

MG: Of course. Yeah. It was very strange in a lot of respects because it was always a very Western look upon this woman, with an aspect that I cannot really understand and also don't really like because in some sense the women who were attacking the scene always had a feeling of seeing themselves up on this stage, which is complete nonsense, because they don't work in the field and they have a very distorted image of what—I don't know—go-go dancers? Whores? And they think a whore is something gross, and I cannot deal with an approach

like that because Cassandra is a poor woman, is a very proud woman, is a woman who does what she does very well and who also enjoys being a queen of this world and who also enjoys having so many men who admire her body, who admire her, who admire her sexuality, and then again, she is like every other woman, she is afraid of being too fat, she is afraid of being not beautiful enough anymore, she's just a normal person. But it's an act—I mean, things like that happen in Japan but in a different way, it reflects a lot on the relationships between men and women in a society, but for me it's never gross, and the last thing I would do is to pity her, and that is completely wrong, or to see yourself up on the stage doing that, I mean that's just a wrong approach.

GK: For me, it was the exact opposite, it was unbearably beautiful. I just...I had such a strong reaction that I wanted everybody in the theater to leave, it was a very private moment to see this, because, I mean, sexuality is my area of interest, women's bodies, and how each culture finds ways to frame it, and this one was just completely out of the box. My immediate reaction was that I was just completely stunned.

MG: And also, this game has rules, and you can see the rules, and how she controls it, and how she controls the men, and how she gets pissed sometimes, to keep them in their place.

GK: Absolutely, the idea of the holy mother was the first—

MG: That's also a Mexican idea, that you see the mother in your sexual partner. They had a flyer once which actually said Burlesque Theater, and it showed Cassandra with a milk bottle in her hand, and it explained that you can live out your feelings towards your mother as a sexual partner. So they are obviously very aware of what they're doing. I might even have this flyer.

GK: You didn't use it in the film...

MG: I didn't use it in the film but I have the flyer.

GK: Even in India, the sexual mother is very big...men are not necessarily the best ones to ask about that and I don't think I can think of an example parallel to this for India...

MG: I tried to shoot on Falkland Road [in Bombay], but it was something in which I did not succeed, even my own co-workers in India did not support—

GK: Well, yeah.

MG: But actually it's also a place on earth that I would like to show because it's pretty unbelievable. I've never seen so much of this mixture between home situations and outdoor prostitution, I mean, there are open [cooking] fires in the street, there are living rooms, and the girls are standing with their babies, breastfeeding their babies and at the same moment exposing themselves to customers. When you drive close to Falkland Road—this was always a scene I wanted to shoot—a scene, where you look outside the taxi cab, and for the last five hundred meters, a guy is running, completely out of breath, looking into the taxi and explaining to you what you can have on this road and on this street. It would have been a many-minute long shot, and then you walk on this street and you go up this incredible stairway up to very small buildings, full of little apartments, and they're open, only a curtain, and then you come up into a room and you sit down on a sofa, and the guy comes and he rings a bell and then 10-15 girls come out and present themselves in front of you. If you say No, then he sends them all away and the next 15 come in. I always wanted to shoot this in one scene, that you see the complete process from the taxi up to this room, but in India, this issue is so touchy, that even my own co-workers were not actually negotiating with people to let me shoot it. I even heard that Mira Nair's Indian Cabaret—that even what she actually shot there was one building on the end of Falkland Road because it was nothing compared to what this really looks like. This was really a place where...I've seen places in the middle where you could compare it to some roads in Pnomh Penh, but this is quite an amazing place.

GK: They're very resistant. At one point I had gone with a friend of mine, and the madam said, We don't allow women, so that was the end of that.

MG: They are very rude there. I negotiated with three or four places, and one would actually have agreed for

an enormous amount of money, but then he said if I wanted to shoot the way I described it, just forget it, because they will carry you out of there—even if I allow you to do that, nobody will actually allow an outdoor shooting there by a foreigner to that extent, so I had to drop it.

GK: So a different issue of shame in India, compared to Mexico City.

MG: Oh yeah. You know how it is, where the limits in India are, there are always erotic images, but they are always fully dressed. I mean, I found some places in Govandi where they have movie theaters—porno video screenings in huts in the poorest area and they made a shit load of money, but that's a very secret thing, that runs with a lot of bribery. In India, I had the feeling that sexuality is all over, everywhere, every Hindi movie is about nothing else, it's said to be about song and dance, but it's all about fucking, but you never see anything. It's very strange—it all has a strange feel to it.

GK: It's one of the things I'm constantly working on, because there is a rhythm that is very old, about what remains secret and what gets exposed, and it's become a genetic memory now. Even with people of my class in India, they're very strict about observing—I mean, for example, everyone I know who's married is having affairs...

MG: But that's, sort of an Asian thing. I hear this if I go to Thailand, all the people tell me, every man has an affair, the woman knows it, but the minute she is publicly confronted with this, she cuts off his prick. All the people always think that these huge prostitution areas in Asia are for foreigners—they were, at some point, but they were there when the American GIs came there. It was actually the Chinese who did that in Thailand, so it's not an invention related to a sell-out, it has a tradition, and in India it's the same, I guess.

GK: In Bombay in particular the whole Falkland Road area was set up by the British...

GK: Well, I would go back and make a film about Cassandra.

MG: I doubt she's working there any more. I mean, to say it rudely, she probably got too old and too fat or whatever, it's a tough business and she worked as this dancer and she also worked as a prostitute.

GK: She's quite big in the film and that's why the whole imagery of the mother really works.

MG: That's also because Mexican men like that, especially lower-class men, not for the higher-class, it's very chic to be thin, but a lower-class man in Mexico City likes a nicely built woman. And she's pretty. She has a nickname, the horse, because she has such a big smile, so they call her the little horse or something like that.

GK: So, you knew Mexico City was your first, and you knew Bombay was the second, and then how did the rest of it evolve?

MG: I had completely other places planned—I planned to shoot in Cairo, and I planned to shoot in an African city, mainly Kinshasa, and I dropped that after the first two cities because I thought that the film should not be something that's only exotic, and I still hate it now when people say, Why didn't you do the whole film like the many-colored man in India, all of that there is so beautiful and the other stuff's not. So, since Vienna is not a mega city—it's a very famous city but it's actually quite little if you compare it to Bombay—and whenever I come back from there I say, Nobody lives here, it's so empty, where is everybody? I tried to find cities that were closer to my own knowledge of upbringing and civilization, and so I started to turn around and do something completely different. I had the feeling that I wanted someone in Mexico or Bombay who saw the film—that for him the images of New York and Moscow should be as exotic as vice-versa. I found that more interesting than to have, like, just the biggest cities or the megacities. You could hardly call Moscow a mega city—actually, you could now, because the rule [for a mega city] says it should be over eight million people, and that's why I changed.

GK: What was the shortlist, or did you know immediately after you changed your mind that you wanted New York and Moscow?

MG: Yeah, in a way, but I had no real reason for that, it was just cities that would qualify and be closer, and

actually in New York I struggled because at the time the whole Giuliani thing was going on and I hated the city and so on my first days of research, I was on 42nd Street, and there was Mikey, and he was trying to hustle me and sell me some air pussy, and I was getting interested in the guy, and he stood there, and they were just building all these Disney movie theaters and he said, you know, Disney ruins my life because every day there are fewer customers and fewer marks. So after going there again and again, I said to the guy, Well you can't sell me air pussy but maybe you want to be in the movie, so he started to talk.

GK: And then in Moscow, how did this connection happen with the woman?

MG: Actually, one thing I forgot that's important, because a lot of people said, Why is Cassandra's the longest part in the movie? Why do you have all the other sequences so short, and Cassandra so long? And I find this very interesting because the working woman in Moscow, her whole episode is exactly the same length as Cassandra's, and I did that on purpose, because I sort of knew what's going to happen. It's also, if you look closely, a very melodramatic part—with classical music, it's also making her a heroine of her work, but it doesn't count as much, because, in a way, sexuality is always a breathtaking thing for people, and they conceive it way longer than it is.

GK: Breath holding, yeah—

MG: Breath holding, breath taking—

GK: —because you're watching that sequence holding your breath the entire time. Interesting. So what else did you anticipate like that while you were putting the film together, that people might want to—

MG: It was not maybe that conscious, but I thought that these two women who are sort of in the center of the film, should balance each other, and that was one thing I remember clearly, that at one point on the editing table I talked to my cutter and asked, How long is this sequence and how long is that and we found out it's the same length, or about the same.

GK: So that must have been very annoying for audience members to hear, right?

MG: They didn't hear it. It's the same as with the chicken sequence—there were a lot of people walking out on seeing that and they asked me, Why do you do that, what's this supposed to mean? Sometimes, honestly, I don't know...for me, it was not that I wanted to show this as something so horrible, all this blood and all these chickens, but when I saw it for the very first time at this Indian market, it was a breathtaking image. It was something that told me something about death, and how long it takes to die and it also had a strange quality of beauty, and I had long arguments with my cutter, how long you can endure watching the image, because she always said you have to endure this image, and I always said, Well, I could stand there much longer watching this, and so we fought back and forth till we found the proper length.

GK: So are you still unhappy with the length of that sequence?

MG: No, I think my balance is quite alright in the film, but I had it way longer and now everybody...a lot of people say, I had to walk out, because it's so long and I couldn't watch it. On the other hand, it's a simple image. I remember that on farms—like my grandmother's little farm, she would cut off the chickens' heads and they run around bleeding, and it was an astonishing image for me as a boy and there it's a big city and a different quantity but it's more or less the same. I find it way more shocking when they have a chicken farm and all the chickens are on a conveyor belt and their heads are cut off nice and clean. In that sense it also tells me that I don't understand how people conceive the world.

GK: So was that one of the things that you were trying to do with the film in general, to look at concepts of how the world is put together?

MG: I guess so. I don't know—I always love to ride trains in Bombay with the open doors. I know it's dangerous and I know it's probably horrible, but I always enjoyed it because it's so...when we get on a bus here, all the doors close, and now if you ride a train you can't even open a window and I still enjoy that—I mean of

course I enjoy it as a Westerner going there and not having to live with it every day, which is a completely different thing, but I don't like it always nice and clean.

GK: How is your film viewed in Austria?

MG: Very well, actually. In terms of a documentary film, it was quite a box office success. That's still small, but it helped in terms of...when I talked earlier about the tradition of Austrian documentary, there were a lot of forces who said, Well, these types of films are so expensive, and we only make them for festival crowds and it's always the same story, that they might be good as they are, and they are very good, but nobody goes to see them, and it's always a couple of hundred people, so this film helped in a way to work against that [attitude] because really a lot of people saw it.

GK: Did it also play on television?

MG: Yeah. There were some stations that wouldn't play it for moral reasons. Like in the States, many channels were actually interested and there was a lot of back and forth on whether they should buy it or not, and I could show you tons of letters from them on how great this film is, but in the end nobody bought it. It was shown at a documentary film festival in Taiwan, in Taipei, and there was a big uproar, and a lot of shouting, and Albert Maysle was on the jury and he accused me of horrible things and so this film was a little scandal there. Then a Taiwanese TV station—they always choose six films from the festival to put on television, so first they came and interviewed me for two hours, and in the end I said, Come on, please, now you must have enough because you won't ever show this here anyway, and then they said, Well, we want to buy it, but would you allow us to cut the movie, and I normally say No, but in Taiwan I was very tempted because I thought, if they put it on air, a couple of million people will see this film! I would actually like it if a couple of million Chinese see my film, I don't care how much they pay—it was, like, nothing. And then I said, Okay, what do you want to edit, and then she made a list and then I said, Well from what you're telling me, it's a one-hour version and it's not going to be a very interesting movie. She said, Yeah, yeah, maybe, but maybe yes, and so I said, What the hell, do whatever you like, you pay some small amount of money and you show it. In the end, she was so caught up in the thing that she actually, I think, cut out five minutes here and there, she cut out the part where Mikey put the needle in and two or three parts of Cassandra, but even Cassandra was in, I mean, even if not in all parts, and I felt it's very nice because you allow censorship, but when people actually sit down to do it, and see that the film is so concise that it starts to fall apart if you actually do it, it overcomes the censorship in a way, and out of the thirty minutes they wanted to take out, it was five in the end. So that was a nice story.

GK: Was it reported in the newspapers...

MG: Yeah, but I could never read it, I have it at home, it looks very nice...

GK: Anybody else showed it on TV that you know of...

MG: I wouldn't know all of them, but actually, this film sort of stays around. It appears on TV from time to time, it was shown in Germany quite often, in Austria quite often, on several European channels. And, a lot of people approach me who teach the film. I got an invitation from a German university to talk about globalization, I told them I know nothing about it, I'm the extremely wrong person, you might see so many things in my film that you can teach, but not me, I'll make another film.

GK: Have you attended any film classes where they looked at your film?

MG: No. I might do stuff like that, but then I tell them I do not give lectures. People can watch my film, then I can talk about it, I can talk about experiences and intentions, but I do not—if I would be willing to do such things, I would do different things.

GK: And they wanted a lecture...

MG: Yes, they did, it's asked for quite often.

GK: *And they haven't said yes to you just coming...*

MG: Oh yes, sometimes that happens, it's happened here in Vienna.

GK: *So, are there questions about your film that you have not been asked, and which you are waiting for someone to ask?*

MG: Actually, if you ask that question now, I would say yes, but also with interviews, you have your own story—I mean, when the film is very fresh, you hardly know what to say, when time moves on, from festival to festival, from newspaper to newspaper, you get a story about the film, and then you're really into the subject of the film, but now for me the film is not very fresh. At the moment as I talk to you, I'm refreshing memories about it. I haven't seen it for a long time, I hardly ever watched it after editing and I never ever watched it in its complete length after editing, so it's a while ago. I would have to probably see it again after all these years. At the moment my head is with my *Workingman's Death* project and another film, so, I wouldn't know right like that.

GK: *Fair enough. Did the film affect your next film opportunity?*

MG: It affected my life a lot because I wanted to make a feature film after that, which was strongly influenced by the story of *Megacities* in the sense that a friend of mine from Sacramento told me there is an American writer who does very similar things to what I do in *Megacities*, and he gave me a book called *The Atlas* by William T. Vollmann and I got really obsessed by this guy and approached him and I bought the rights to a book he wrote called *Butterfly Stories*, and I spent almost three years of my life trying to get this film financed. The script that I wrote together with Vollmann is very sexually explicit and in a very strange way, a third world-first world story, and I had this film financed almost to the point where it got made, I was already casting in the States and I took a long trip to Thailand and Pnomh Penh, where the film should actually be shot, and the financing crumbled at the last minute. So in that sense, I had to start anew. I still have this project and I've still been trying to finance it all these years, because it came to be a very important project for me; also, in connection to this writer, who I think is an extremely interesting person. And the film I'm doing now, a film called *Workingman's Death*, is in a way a follow-up film, but it will also be completely different because it has a very distinct theme, and it again brings me to different corners of the world and it's a very highly budgeted documentary film, way more than *Megacities* was, and I could only get the money together because *Megacities* was what it was, and because of the reputation it has. So even people who didn't like it, and followed the controversy over many years, they said, Well, even if we're against many issues in the film, you should do a follow-up project.

GK: *So where all are you shooting for this film?*

MG: My first step was illegal mines in the Ukraine, and from now on it's the same story as with *Megacities*, I really intend to shoot in China, I want very much to shoot in North Korea but I probably will never make it, I tried to shoot in the United States but in countries like that, factories, or working environs are nowadays very enclosed and very hard to film. Sometimes I think making a movie about the Catholic church is easier. I've been trying now for almost two years to enter meat factories in Kansas and surroundings like that, but I haven't been admitted to any of those places so far, specially in terms of shooting there, and being endangered there, and the possibility that we would sue them or whatever, it's very complicated nowadays if you try to make movies in first-world countries. Even in my own country, I have difficulty entering spaces of heavy metal industry.

GK: *When do you anticipate completion?*

MG: In 2004. I will spend all of next year doing research. I already spent two years doing pre-research for financing the movie, so I know many locations, I've been to gem mines in Tanzania, I've been to Bangladeshi ship-breaking yards, I've been to Indian ship breaking yards, been to China...the film starts off with the socialist idea of the working class hero, of the model worker, and of the worker being of extreme value for a society as it was in Communist times, or even as it was in the United States, with Ford cars, and meat-processing in

Chicago, being a very strong force, and nowadays there are so many environments and places where this still happens, but the value of the people or, of how society sees them, gets lower and lower. The first sequence I shot in the Ukraine—of course the biggest mining area in the world, the Donbass area where there's coal-mining to the extent that every bigger city had ten mines, and every small village had one mine, hundreds and hundreds of mines, and nowadays people don't get money or status for the work to the extent that they start digging coal illegally, with hammers and pickaxes, and sell it on the illegal free trade market, which is a very contradictory situation. That's the same for ship-breaking in India or Bangladesh where people who are farmers come totally unequipped to places where they take apart the largest piece of machinery with their bare hands, and there is no model worker. Also, they are all model workers. China had the same thing—in Russia it was Stakhanov for coal, where he set up a world record for how many tons of coal he could extract from the mine in a day. This was known all over the Soviet Union, and he was like bigger than any sports star, he was really a hero, and the Chinese had this for every field of work—for oil drilling, for mining, they had one model worker who was like the hero for society.

GK: It seems that at the philosophical level one of the biggest taboos that a film like Megacities—and perhaps your other work—is looking at, is labor. In the United States, nobody wants to know where anything comes from anymore.

MG: That brings us back to the chickens. If you see death—I mean, many people said they don't ever want to eat a chicken again, and I find it completely ridiculous. If you eat animals or chicken or whatever, you can also see things die because if you eat a chicken it has to do with death. Yeah, it is hard sometimes, I find pigs extremely cute and I also don't want to know the pig that I'm eating, but that's a contradiction for mankind.

GK: So, film school did or didn't make you into a filmmaker?

MG: I feel film school can never make you into a filmmaker, or even the teachers there—film school is an environment, it's always as good as the people you meet there and work with. It's an opportunity to actually get a camera or equipment, find out what it means. When you've found that out, you can make the decisions you really want to. The skills are not as hard to learn, it's more a decision of whether you want that life.

GK: What is that life...

MG: You probably have to do everything for that, you can't do much else. Or you work in television, but even there the competition is very high. Very few people get rich and famous by this type of work.

GK: Is it surprising to you that you are well known now or that the films are well known?

MG: They're not that well known. What I like about the way in which I'm a filmmaker is that I do these different things. For me documentary filmmaking is a very special kind of life and I come to see places in a way that I could not see by just traveling, and I would also feel lost to travel without the purpose of watching things in order to work with them, and that makes sense to me. If I weren't a filmmaker, I wouldn't take that time for traveling and watching, so that makes me very happy. The people I meet for these films, that makes them very happy. With feature films it's more about having ideas to write. The actual shooting of a feature film is connected to so much money and stress and so much production stuff that it's not the greatest thing in the world. I'm more excited if I'm traveling to an illegal mine in the Ukraine and thinking of a way of how to shoot there, when it is almost impossible—rather than to set up a production scheme for a feature film. I've done two features so far, one is quite old, and one I did this summer, it's called Slugs, and it's about a group of young people who've got nothing much to do in their lives and they get an offer to shoot a porn movie, and they go to their parents' house while they're on vacation to try it out. It's a dark comedy of a very obvious fable.

GK: This was not done through Lotus.

MG: No.

GK: Is it available?

MG: No, it's in editing.

GK: *Has there been a particular logic which has taken you between the different kinds of filmmaking that you do?*

MG: It started with *Megacities* in a way—I was trying out many things before that, I did experimental films and I did a feature film which is very local, a very Viennese movie. I did a film called *War in Vienna*, which was my final movie in film school, which was an extremely low budget project that I actually did together with Ulrich Seidl—that film is not known, it's never been shown, it was in the movie theater here for one week, and I don't think it even went to a festival, it's so low budget that it doesn't exist. It was a film about four days in the world, we collected the evening news from forty different countries and inter cut it with everyday life scenes in Vienna.

GK: *Do you feel that your films are particularly Austrian in outlook?*

MG: I don't think so. Maybe *Ant Street*, that was my first feature, that was particularly Austrian, but *Megacities* is a film of a white Westerner going to see different places in the world, but it's not especially a film of an Austrian doing that.

GK: *Well, it's definitely not an American film.*

MG: Yes, that might be true. I was amazed by the puzzlement the film evoked at the Sundance showing, because as I said, there were discussions for two hours, then I went out and still people were gathering around me and they couldn't even believe that this film was made.

GK: *Exactly.*

MG: And they couldn't believe that there exists a way to raise this kind of money for such a film. It's European, it's not Austrian specifically, to raise money like that. But not in the States, I'm sure.

GK: *But it also doesn't feel, in outlook, like an American would approach...*

MG: Yes, that's what I always wanted to say, that there are very few people who would even approach such a thing, that's why I also got so intrigued by Vollmann's work because he does that in writing to a greater extreme than I could ever do with a film. He once said to me, I'm only so famous because people don't read the books...because the books really are quite wild.

GK: *In this way, have you been notified of other people who do things in a way similar to yours? Have you been told, you should see the work of this one or that one because it's like yours?*

MG: Like mine? Not really. *Megacities* was happening at the point when hardly any films had this concept of going to different places and showing very concise moments. I think after that movie, some films like that came out, but that doesn't only have to do with my film, I think that really has to do with what they call globalization—people don't go any more to one place in the world and do their film about some tribe, but they try to find concepts of thinking where things can be a little more connected.

GK: *For somebody who's paying attention in film school, you're taught all these things, quite clearly, that you're supposed to have your concept shaped before you begin. For no good reason, you have to completely fight the system in order to make a film like this [*Megacities*] because it's constraining—*

MG: Yeah, I mean, that's what I was trying to say—I think in the States too, if someone really wants to make a film like that, in terms of the filmmaking that happens there, it's not that expensive, it cost a million dollars—not even, less than that, something like 800,000 dollars—if the real need was there, it could be made, but I don't see that the need to make such films is very widespread. If you go to see the Sundance programming, it's very tame, conservative, and I would say 80-90% of the movies there are made as a career step, and that's a very different approach. If you would do a film like *Megacities* and think a career would follow the film,

you're an idiot, so it's a completely different approach to filmmaking.

GK: But a career can follow a film like yours.

MG: In Europe. In Europe. With the Vollmann project, I had many values surrounding the film—Vollmann's a known writer in the US. I had this film in my pocket and nobody said, It's a bad film, and we don't know what you're trying to do. I had a few actors who were quite willing to go with it, but it was not financed yet and I had people do the music on the film, so it was a very strange package, and they didn't really know what I was going for, but they were so afraid that the film would get too explicit and too far-away from what would be saleable, that I could not raise a cent.

GK: But sex always sells, in the end it always sells.

MG: If the film would have been made, everybody would have sold it as a scandal and whatever—people were even agreed on that, but they said it's not worth the trouble, it's easier to make a nice, clean-cut movie. I think it will get made in the end. It's such a wonderful book by Vollmann. He deserves to have a film made based on his books. There was an attempt—he wrote another book called *Whores for Gloria*, there was an attempt to make a movie out of that—set in the Tenderloin district, it deserves to be the center of a film.

GK: Did Megacities actually get banned anywhere?

MG: No. But also in the States it got a distributor on a very small scale and they don't do anything. Actually, the nice thing about that story is that they ordered the print here, they never paid for it, but it's the last nice print, it must be somewhere, I don't know where it is—it's the Roxie—they have this print and I think it's the last nice print that's around because all the other prints have seen so many festivals that they're probably torn.

GK: I saw that print in Berkeley.

GK: Do you see yourself continuing to work in the medium of film or have you already begun with video?

MG: With the hitchhiking film I told you about, the political film that I did, I worked for the first time as a one-man band, but only because this could not have been done in any other fashion, because if you enter a car and you do the sound and the image yourself, there's no other way to do it, and I was happy to use video for that specific reason. But I think—I'm very unhappy that nowadays if you go to a documentary film festival you hardly see any proper image anymore, and there has been something of what I would call a devaluation of the image and for some time this looked funky, but now if you look at it, most of it looks, in a way, like shit, and it's a very strange situation in that sense, that you shoot in a very cheap format and use an extreme amount of money to blow it up to a format that hardly exists anymore for documentary films, and no one really knows what the situation is there. And I don't know yet. It took me a long time to decide how to shoot *Workingman's Death* because I also thought maybe not the small camera DV stuff, but HDTV is very very good these days, but there, in the end, it's not cheaper, and I still think that the image you get when you shoot on film, it has some kind of old-fashioned but very proper quality to it—it's a little more mysterious—it's not even technically any better anymore, in that sense it doesn't make much sense to shoot on film, and you're very limited by the amount of stock you can shoot, but this limitation is on the one hand challenging, and makes you work in a completely different way, and you have to control way more what you do and how you do it, and also, film image still has a mysterious or quieter quality which I like.

GK: You were talking earlier about enjoying moments from films. Are there any kinds of films that you won't see, or don't see?

MG: At the moment I'm doing a lot of work, and probably every filmmaker will tell you that there are different phases they have, the phase where you write and watch movies and the phase where you work and you don't watch. So at this very moment, as I said, I might go see a commercial film or whatever. I got very attracted in some periods to seeing a lot of commercial films which I would never do, I'm getting more and more bored with it, I'm going back to early phases: I watch strange films—very rarely do I go to see a big box office hit,

it's always more of the same, which is nothing new. I loved the Matrix, which was very new and refreshing and was a wonderful commercial movie. It's the last big film where I remember feeling, Wow, I've never seen anything like it, this is all so technically amazing that I can't even imagine how they did it.

GK: What are some of your strange film tastes?

MG: Well, that also comes in phases. It's always hard when you're not in a phase where you watch a lot of movies—a lot of French films in the last 20 years have had a huge impact and were very interesting. I also think of Austrian feature films like Northern Skirts which was done by very young filmmakers, influenced by very realistic French cinema, which is very important for filmmaking.

GK: The fact that filmmaking is so intensely collaborative, does that ever become a real problem for you?

MG: Sometimes it does—the bigger the crews get, the harder it is to make the shot, which is also nothing new. Probably every director has that problem, or that choice, but now, like after shooting this feature film Slugs, I was very very happy to go back to a team of ten, instead of fifty. Within a group of ten, it gets so much easier to move, and re-think, and re-schedule, or make up your mind and say No, no, let's do it like that, and that's a freedom I like. If you talk to Ulrich Seidl, he made his film Dog Days, almost shot it in that way—it's a feature film shot with a small crew but over a long period of time—he did a very good job using the methods of documentary film making in a feature film.

To answer an earlier question, long long ago, I saw a film by Werner Herzog called Fata Morgana, hardly known, which is a strange film, as I would call it—which I would call influential.

GK: Had you already been watching films steadily for years and years before you went off to the—

MG: Yes.

GK: So, you already knew this was—

MG: Yes I was organizing a little film club in my home town and showed some films that wouldn't come to town, so it was always an idea of mine.

GK: Where is your home town?

MG: Graz, it's the second largest city in Austria, in the South, on the Slovenian border.

GK: What finally made you decide to go to the Art Institute?

MG: I was doing some traveling at that time, and I enjoyed being in San Francisco. I saw this strange building up on the hill and I went there and asked what they do and I saw some programs. At that time, around 1981-2, you could afford it, these days it's just senseless because for what you pay there you don't even get the film materials, but at the time it was possible.

GK: Did you get a degree from there?

MG: No. I stayed there for 1 1/2 years and then I had to make the decision to get involved in the American film industry or filmmaking there, or to go home. So, I came home. I thought it makes more sense to try here and I'm not unhappy about that.

GK: Was there a long gap before you worked on your first film?

MG: I was quite young, I spent that year at the Art Institute, then I came here and enrolled in film school here and attended for five years, and then I left.

GK: So did you get a degree from the film school here?

MG: No, I walked away in anger like a lot of people do, but it's not worth getting into, as I said, the degree is for nothing, as a filmmaker you can also make a film by taking out a loan...

GK: Is that how you did yours?

MG: Of course in film school you get material, but it's never enough, and in the case of a chance to make a no-budget film, they hardly give you any more and then your credit card starts working. I talked to a lot of colleagues in the States and they sort of envy us for government-funded films because I think your first chance in New York is a third of the money that we would get, and if you blow it, you've had it.

GK: When you were staging the different set-ups in Megacities, how much direction to the people was actually involved?

MG: Hardly any. As I explained to you with the example of Tony the Hustler, it's more of the set-up. I tell my cameraman what to do, how to follow the scene, I tell Tony to behave like he normally behaves, and I tell a chosen person to come around the corner. That's it. Sometimes things happen—like, the third scene that a lot of people get angry with in Megacities is when the guy in the hotel room robs the other guy. This was just an offer from Tony the Hustler because he said, you know what we do if we can't sell air pussy—and he hired a friend of his, and he said to set up the camera in the hotel room, then they played the little scene for us. I said nothing, I didn't even know what would happen. It was an offer. I might say, Do it again, but I wouldn't say, Do it like this, or put more here—that would go too far, then you really start directing a feature film.

GK: And did it work, the Do it again, brought out something—

MG: Yes, after the third take it gets worse. But if you shoot a feature film with non-actors, that's also the rule of the game, if you cannot get it in the first three takes, it's over, mostly the first...

GK: So how do you know?

MG: The only thing you have to know is whether a person can do things like that, if he is a natural, if he can be himself in front of a camera, so it's not much different choosing non-actors, actually easier because hardly ever in a documentary do you mix an actor with a non-actor. And I mean, a person who hustles other persons on the street and convinces them to buy pussy that isn't there, if this guy is not an actor...! So that decision was easy, but with other people you find out through the way you approach them, you meet them again and again, how they think about doing that, also what they have to do—now with the workers [Workingman's Death] it's very easy because they have to be interesting personalities, but on the other hand, they have something that is their job which they do in front of the camera. They dig out coal the way nobody else can, so you get a feel for who can do stuff like that.

GK: Was there any point in the process of Megacities where you either had a very strong sense that yes, this is going to go all the way through into becoming an unusual or remarkable product, or in some other film did you have to stop because you saw, No, this is not working...

MG: With a film like that, it was actually pretty risky I guess, because you really don't know before you edit. With a feature film, you know when you have the script, and then you can do good or bad, but it stays within the limits of the script. With Megacities I was collecting bits and pieces, and I had no idea how this would work, and it took me a very long time to structure it on the editing table, and till the very last moment, it didn't go too well—the first cut that I showed to people they thought it's a confusing pile of images, and it took very long till it got its form.

GK: So what finally—

MG: I think the form of having chapters, and not intermingling everything with everything, but structured very simply—which was not my intention in the beginning—made the film graspable in all its diversity.

GK: If you were asked to re-release the film in a director's cut would you change it, the editing?

MG: No, I had complete freedom. Complete freedom. I could do whatever I wanted. This is the film I wanted to do. I'm always surprised that when directors release director's cuts that the films get longer. I am not in the league of directors who make four-hour documentaries. I'm looking for concise moments. Actually, that was also an accusation, that the film moves so quickly and to an extent is almost entertaining, but those are things I'm after. Maybe I would even cut something out if I go over it now...but with this film, maybe not. I would shoot some things differently if I did it now, but not edit it.

GK: Do you work with the same crew on all your films?

MG: Almost, not always, but on *Workingman's Death* only one or two people changed—as life goes on, some people do other things...

GK: So, for example when you brought the film to your editor you had some anticipation that she would do something with it..

MG: Yeah, she cried over it! No. But it took us a while.

GK: She cried over it!

MG: No...

GK: Does it help with a documentary filmmaker if you have the same editor?

MG: I don't always, I have an editor I work a lot with, but not always. Like the sports movie [*France Here We Are!*] was edited by a different person, and she'll do *Workingman's Death* now, and my editor for *Megacities* will do my feature, so there are about three people I work with.

GK: This idea of the director as the auteur which is so big, do you feel that in the end these are all your films?

MG: With *Megacities*, yes, this is very much my film. With the hitchhiking film for example—which is actually a sequence in the film that four directors did on the political situation in Austria—I passed on the ball so very much to the people who picked me up because I didn't even choose the people, they chose me by picking me up as a hitchhiker and they started talking, so with this film I also say that the people who are in the movie are very strong auteurs, that is something very documentary-like and very realistic—the only real decision I made was to use only two kinds of images, and which people to take.

GK: Do you write about film?

MG: About film, no, but I write scripts, also sometimes for other people.

GK: A fair number? 6? 10?

MG: 5 or 10, but not all of them have been made into films. But I also review scripts or get paid to say what's wrong with a script.

GK: But you don't do any of the peripheral criticism or film theory...

MG: I wouldn't want to.

GK: Is there a reason?

MG: It's a completely different way of thinking. Filmmakers are normally pretty amazed by what film theorists write about them. Sometimes when people ask me questions, and they are from that field, I hardly recognize that they're talking about my film. It's not very compatible. I mean, I enjoy it sometimes, I read articles on

Megacities where I thought, Did I do that? The approach of somebody who makes movies is, I think, a lot simpler, based on things that you do, and live.

GK: One of the things I'm trying to look at with this book project is, in fact, this huge difference between how films get made—the filmmakers' points of view on how films get made, and then people who don't understand how films get made, who write film theory and criticism.

MG: And it's interesting—I do not at all look down on it, I'm just amazed sometimes what thoughts are evoked by the things you do. Sometimes you've thought of the things, and sometimes it's even complicated and you've thought of it, and then other times you think, what the hell, what is this?

GK: Do you read all the materials...?

MG: Yes, if it's interesting. I mean, whether good or bad—there are good reviews where you think, Come on, it's nice that you like the film, but that has nothing to do with me. Sometimes you're annoyed, very rarely is it very interesting. I had a very nice thing with Megacities—there was a documentary film festival in Amsterdam—I don't know if I still have this—but it was a very big newspaper, big like this, and on the left side a film critic wrote pro-Megacities, and on the right side, contra-Megacities. It was like a discussion, a debate over the pages, and both were quite nice, I got it only roughly translated but both were good arguments.

GK: Do you think it would be a benefit if more filmmakers actually wrote about film?

MG: No, why? I mean, it's a different profession, why should they? We discuss films, we watch films...I have friends who started out as critics but they all stopped when they went into film. And most of the time, that goes better than the other way around. I think there are hardly any—it goes better if it's an early stage, like there was a very famous German film critic called Hans-Christoph Blumenberg. He wrote many books, many reviews, he was sort of a cult figure. And then very theatrically he wrote his last article and said that from tomorrow on I'm a filmmaker. He made a couple films but they were a complete disaster. And he had good taste, he liked movies, he really influenced the way of thinking about films in Germany, Hans-Christoph Blumenberg is his name and he made pure shit. Bad move.

GK: It seems that there's also a division between intellect and emotion because as a filmmaker, in my view, you really have to enter into the emotional moment.

MG: Well, in history there are some other examples, the whole New Wave—Goddard, everybody, they were all film critics, but they didn't interfere, those were different times.

HIDDEN CAMERA

A Home Movie

Written and Directed by Ginu Kamani

with the extraordinary participation of Michael Glawogger as The Muse

GUMPENDORFERSTRASSE, VIENNA, DEC 26, 2002

Ginu to The Muse:

The Cassandra sequence was unbearably beautiful. I had such a strong reaction that I wanted everybody in the theatre to leave; it was a very private moment to see this.

For that sequence alone I would like to show your film where I teach, because I teach in a women's college, and this is the kind of work that is never permitted because instructors wouldn't know what to say—how do you present this, how do you frame it for the students. That's the kind of challenge I get very interested in.

**I* would go back and make a film about Cassandra.*

* * * * *

June 2, 2003

Cassandra in slow motion is a moving fresco like something out of a church.

Oct 23, 2003

I was watching the DVD of 8 1/2 put out by the Criterion Collection and on the audio commentary which features several scholars, the mention is made that Claudia Cardinale is Guido's salvation. My mind immediately flashed to Cassandra in Megacities, and the night club scene and its complex dance of salvation and redemption.

God may be a father, but that holy ghost in the trinity is this ephemeral Mexican Cassandra, without a doubt.

Oct 26, 2003

*By any chance did any of Cassandra's patrons talk about their feelings of guilt? I think that in the moment of enjoyment, for someone truly possessed in the moment of emotion, *by* emotion, that the body takes over and does what it must as naturally as the tide ebbing and flowing on the beach--so, for example, the muscular movements of the body that arise from uninhibited sexual arousal and pleasure are amazing to observe--the body in action, utilizing the deep knowledge encoded in every cell (same with the wild outbursts of sports fans, a body fully absorbed in music and dance, the rhythms of repetitive work, etc.)*

The submission to self-erasure, of "forgetting oneself" completely through sexual merging, is the same strategy for submission to self-erasure through "forgetting oneself" in the deeply mystical approach of religious faith, yet one sort of merging is problematized through guilt while the other is not.

Feb 12, 2004

Cassandra being "mauled" by the men?? Fuck, no! They're just doing what comes naturally to them, and they're doing it without shame, in front of one another, like puppies or kittens or cubs.

I think I want to do a film where the multi-orgasmic man just lies back the whole time.

Feb 20, 2004

Your film was the cornerstone of my project idea with Sundance, because of the issues of morality raised for the

average American. But the discussions about the Cassandra sequence are the most dishonest of all. I'm not sure if you realize what you've done (does any artist?) But there's no doubt in my mind that Megacities was made for ME. (Are you my teacher?) I've now seen the film a few dozen times, and it's like the Vedas, it's so packed, every time I watch, I see something I didn't catch before.

As far as responses from my students to watching the Cassandra sequence--out of 11 students, I think ten wrote something about how they were disgusted at Cassandra being "mauled" and "pawed at" and "groped" by "strange men" and since they never saw her smile or look happy during her act (Who smiles during sex?) they knew that she didn't get any pleasure from any of it, and that's why they found it disturbing. In other words, if Cassandra had smiled shyly and sweetly and invitingly for the camera, they might have had an easier time with it. Of course the way you shot and edited the footage is so complex (by the way, I am VERY curious to see the Cassandra footage that didn't make it into the film) that for someone like me the Cassandra sequence forms a secret code.

Feb 29, 2004

My brain spit out a very important connection for me yesterday, the flip side of the Cassandra episode of your film, is the central dichotomy in Lina Wertmüller's *Seven Beauties* [Pasqualino Settebellezze] from 1976, have you seen it--a truly formative exposure for me, she's been an influence on me more than any writer) where Giancarlo Giannini is convinced that seducing the Camp Kommandante (fantastic casting, this iceberg of a German woman) is his only way of escaping sure death in the concentration camp, and the seduction sequence, of a starving fearful rat of a prisoner, going at it with this mountain of ice, is so magical, it's so primal--he's literally crawling all over this mountain of pink flesh, first this way, then that way, like a cockroach or a mole, trying to find an opening into which he can pour some love, bring her pleasure, and get his life spared. The scene shocked the life out of me when I first saw it in 1978 at 16, very late at night on Chicago Public Television--I kept falling in and out of sleep while watching because I used to get up at 5:30 every morning to deliver newspapers and was exhausted, and of course that was before videos, and I didn't see the film again until ten years later when I was working in film, and meanwhile, the film haunted me so much for 10 years that I finally had to see it again just to make sure that I hadn't invented the whole thing.

Mar 4, 2004

Subject: Christ on the cross vs. Cassandra on the stage

[I began this at midnight last night. It came upon me like a storm, this double vision of Christ on the cross super imposed onto Cassandra on the stage with her man-puppies and her rhythmic rocking.]

They misunderstood him. He was an invitation--to liquefy an already softening body into fluid gnosis. Liquid knowledge. His form on that cross is an open invitation to receive--receive knowledge--but no one stepped forward. He had twelve disciples, and none of them could step forward to suckle from his body. He created extra wounds as enticement, and still no one came forward. And likely the disciples censored his words before committing them to text, because the fluid gnosis was 'unbearable.' So the full strength of his knowledge took off, searching around--yogini, she was, stuck in Christ's body.

Mar 7, 2004

I've never claimed to be the origin of original ideas (recycling is such a gentler option), but after thinking through issues of economics around your film (a topic I voiced to you briefly in an earlier email), and issues of not-religion (secularism) derived from religion (Christianity), I was especially pleased to find a book titled *Economics as Religion* while surfing the net today.

I've been reading travelogues about the discomforts and revelations of Westerners travelling to India for about 15 years now, it's a fascinating intersection of perspectives for me, with my own life having unfolded in the US since the age of 14, and the one thing that no one seems able to avoid mentioning about India is the in-your-face poverty of urban areas, and literally, middle-class Americans who may live in gated communities back home, can't stop commenting disapprovingly on how any Indian can ride in a car or own an expensive house given the level of

poverty on the streets--the profound sense of moral injustice induced in Westerners by scenes of poverty, SCENES, mind you, VISIONS--taps into their guilt very easily, with no thought to the fact that their system of values, AND THEIR SYSTEM OF VISIONS, OF SEEING, may actually be inadequate for engaging with this Indian world--that lack of possessions can have deeper meanings than lack of comfort, that comfort could be, or needs to be, measured by the presence of THINGS--that, in fact, the presence of things automatically signals the presence of comfort, and that the lack of things is immediately equivalent to a lack of intimacy, or pleasure, or joy.

[This vision is actually quite interesting to me, because I associate monastic solitude and possession-less-ness with supercharged auto-eroticism, a very deeply rich fantasy life, and very real communion with the divine.]

Mar 18, 2004

Very, very few critics (Michael gave me Xeroxes) have anything much to say about the process of the film. And everyone was stumped about Cassandra. I think the concentric structure of the film--all those hands laboring away, producing consumer items, when, in fact, all those hands would rather be laboring away at Cassandra's sexual explosions--is too beautiful to brook any argument of the ultimate nature of Michael's question to the universe as a filmmaker, a creator.

Mar 18, 2004

You provided me with an incredibly thorough packet of reviews for Megacities, which I keep browsing through now and again, though it's depressing, and I come out of the experience feeling soiled and gracelessly manipulated. Megacities delivers such a rich inversion of the millennia-old paranoia and terror of European/Christian contact with the non-Christian world, that it has sent me spiraling off into so many different directions that I'm finally ready to write my Ph. D, on your film. Ha ha.

When I reflect on the varieties of discomfort generated by your film, I feel the heat of the cooking process of the reviewers, but the food delivered from this process is half-baked and generates neither food nor receptivity nor epiphany. Your responses to some of the questioners strike me as really funny (you shot only the Cassandra sequence as a 'voyeur'?!) and the more I read the responses to the film, the more I'm convinced that you probably have four or five director's commentaries worth of storytelling on this project.

Mar 29, 2004

Juan Alcazar in Oaxaca did a lithograph series some years back of club strippers that is awesome, jaw-dropping, essence-ialized sexuality, and I want to interview him on his work and I want a full set of slides or photos or something, those lithos were so holy in what they captured, just like Megacities' Cassandra--in fact, I'm just going to track down all the referents that have returned to me since watching Megacities, all the triggers that Cassandra has set off for me.

April 3, 2004

STORY BOARDS FOR A PH. D OR HOW CASSANDRA PROPHESED MY PAST: A TIME TRAVEL by Ginu Kamani [Possible project title?]

April 18, 2004

Hi Michael, I wonder whether you're in China now, or Nigeria, or back in Pakistan. Sometimes I remember very vividly in my bones, in my muscle memory, how intense a shoot can be, how it takes over every nerve cell, every heartbeat, every molecule of intelligence, but bound as I am to my desk all the time now, it seems hard to imagine, all my producer's experiences with shooting filtered only through memory now.

So, ever since I cracked the joke about having enough reflections and analysis on Megacities to now write my Ph D, the idea very congenially morphed into something fantastically concrete. I just saw a landmark film, I'll get to that later, and, of course, as usual, Cassandra is connected to this--by the way, in case you think I'm an isolated freak case, I have a couple of other incredibly articulate women who did the same thing I did, which was to watch

the Cassandra sequence about 20 times in a row in complete shock--it was worth the \$40 transfer to DVD--one of them being my Teaching Assistant who was as incensed as I was at the reaction of the class to the Cassandra sequence--just yesterday she said again that what Cassandra does on stage is not FAKE, it's a RITUAL, but Americans can't understand that.

*On Easter Sunday I saw two showings of Ulrich Seidl's *Jesus, Du Weisst*, and before each screening, Edith Kramer announced that Seidl had planned on joining the priesthood, and suddenly his films fell into place. Him and Scorsese and Herzog, all of a piece, as is said in English, cut from the same cloth. Judging by what he gets people to do on film, he would have made a fine priest, earning the trust of his flock. Observing all those church interiors, I finally "got it"--those churches look like the insides of the churches in Old Goa, and suddenly I see why your connection to Cassandra would be different from an American's, but how, because you're "white," and "northern European," that you would be assumed as "one of us" in the American way of conflating race (they do the same with the Russians, blech), and, consequently, why Megacities might confuse the hell out of an American audience--so dependent, even the most sophisticated of them--so dependent on cliché to bridge the cultural gap Americans are so isolated and lonely and repressed, they live for cliché. But your film has no clichés, so the Americans have no ally in you.*

*Anyway, back to the landmark film I mentioned, tonight I watched *Stella* by Michael Cacoyannis, from 1955, the year my parents were courting, for god's sake! Starring Melina Mercouri, who, for some strange reason, I have never seen on film before. Whew. Melodrama is a form I have had a love-hate relationship with over the years, and I suddenly figured out why I have such violent reactions to melodrama, swinging from one end of the emotional pendulum to the other, and what Cassandra's ritual represents. In *Stella*, Melina Mercouri plays the female free spirit who attracts men, draws them in on the coat tails of their emotions, their shameless, bottomless love for a woman. It is the MEN who beg to be let in, and it is the MAN who dies out of heartache. I felt like I went through some dimensional wall and landed hard on my back out of breath on the floor--I suddenly understood the power of melodrama in its modern twisted form--in the distorted vision of the middle classes, all over, anywhere, I suppose, now, wherever there are television soaps, the logic is mutated so that again and again, audiences are shown WOMEN sacrificing themselves when, in fact, it is known elsewhere, everywhere, it's in the muscle memory, that it is MEN who sacrifice, it is MEN who suffer, because it is men who try to possess the insatiable female, and the insatiable female does not appreciate being possessed--she cannot be, she is not a THING, she is an energy pattern. Bingo! Marriage--as possession and ownership of the female--heralds the decline of "civilization".*

So, the ritual embodied by Cassandra the dancer exists to give men courage, the courage to NOT submit, to NOT succumb, to be "macho" and not lose themselves to the colossal ocean of chemical attraction that is the female. That's not an "act", it's a ritual--that's "St. George slaying the dragon", night after night.

*So, back to the Ph. D. I have a story for you--very interestingly, in early 1994, while the manuscript for *Jungle Girl* sat at my press, aunt lute, before they'd committed to publishing it, I sent my manuscript to an editor at another press on the recommendation of a friend, and within a few weeks I heard from this editor that he loved the work, wanted to publish it, but that his press publishes 99 percent nonfiction, and my stories being fiction, he was having a hard time convincing his bosses, even though all the editors in the publishing house loved the stories, blah blah blah, anyway, in the end he couldn't get my stories published, and a few weeks later this editor invited me to lunch and asked whether I'd write a sexual memoir, because that would be nonfiction, and he could publish that! And I said, a memoir? I'm 32! I can't write a memoir, not yet. And he said, think about it, anyone who writes sexual fiction like you do can write a sexual memoir, and if you do, please let me publish it. I went home scratching my head, wondering what I would write about. Ideas came and went, but nothing stuck, and the whole thing was completely forgotten until this year, ten years later, until the joke I made last month that your film has triggered such an avalanche of stuff in me that I'm ready to write my Ph. D.*

May 24, 2004

*I have a film made in 1974 by Alfonso Arau, *Tivoli*, on this exact burlesque form, in Mexico City, it's set in the 40s and 50s at the very famous theatre of the same name, and is about the political move to have the theatre torn down for being a den of vice, etc. I'm bringing it for you to watch--I think you will be amazed at how similar the burlesque sequences are! And I am sure you will also find it interesting how differently you and Arau have delivered the "story" of the burlesque.*

Jan 9, 2006

Did you know, when you got the Cassandra footage that you had something volatile on your hands, did you know that she might become the very symbol by which viewers and critics and whoever might challenge your ethical "decency" as a filmmaker (or a human being, whichever is more important)? How much of the story of shooting and interacting with someone like Cassandra do you censor to fit the story of decency?

Feb 17, 2006

When do you shoot in Mexico City? Does Cassandra make a re-appearance?

Feb 22, 2006

Cassandra terrifies me! As do the babushkas in Moscow, as do the gentlemen in the drunk tank. Why? They have that quality of the dream already seen that never manifests itself in waking.

Feb 24, 2006

You're a muse, so you make me want to write. Not only write, but write enormously complex material. That stuff about Christ on the cross and Cassandra on the stage blew me away. That was such an intense channelling.

My first encounter with the sexual female body was a staged show. I was 7. We were in Jaipur for two years, in the desert, 1968-70, this happened in 1969 as far as I recall. I wrote it up in 1999 as part of a grant request--

THE LAUGHING YONI: A MEMOIR OF INITIATION

Almost every Indian of "good family" has experienced the ubiquitous presence of servants in the household from birth to death. Due to the closely shared space, servants are intimately acquainted with domestic affairs, but their citizenship in well-to-do families is often as shadow figures.

Growing up in India until the age of 14, I had contact with many women servants. Most were semi-literate migrants from the hinterland, generally occupied 12-15 hours a day, cut off from friends and family, with few rights, since employers have the power to terminate them at a moment's notice.

The huge gap in values resulting from acute differences of class, caste, language, religion, Westernization and urban life, literally makes servants and employers foreign to each other. Yet, the children of the affluent are often more tightly bonded to their servants than to their parents.

In the sexually repressed middle class culture of urban India, access to bodies, nakedness, or information on sexual matters is still very tightly controlled, so that an average bright, curious girl could go through life in complete ignorance of the sexual body.

In my case, I was saved from this ignorance by a curious detour of fate, when at the age of 7, in the city of Jaipur, an unknown tribal woman who worked on our estate lawns led a fleeting initiation to the female sexual body by gathering several of us children together into a room and whirling around, laughing with gusto. Her skirt rose to her waist and stayed suspended for many moments, exposing her naked body. With glee, she then proceeded to squirt jets of milk from her breasts down the wall of the room. And then she was gone.

This woman's actions were joyous, inclusive, unaggressive, though slightly traumatic for the children (siblings and cousins) of a repressed culture like ours. In retrospect, I know that her confident intrusion changed the course of my life, saving me from ignorance, and providing a platform to undo my cultural repressions. Her actions have fundamentally shaped my goals as a writer. I am eternally indebted to her.

Thirty years later, I plan to undertake the mission of finding this mystery woman. In the process I aim to unpack deepest India itself, opening up the Pandora's Box heavy with reified barriers of gender, sexuality, class, caste,

ethnicity and cultural migration, all seemingly insurmountable in a culture as old as India's.

Whenever I read over my proposals I feel like giggling. Of course I never found the woman, though it turned out that the women working on the lawns when I visited in 1999, had been around since when our family had owned the place. But they were hostile and not interested in being interviewed and claimed to have no idea who I might be referring to.

She couldn't have been locked in that room with us for more than 5 minutes, since she would have gotten into trouble instantly if discovered. I learned only recently that a young cousin of mine [very young! 4 years old!] had somehow dared this woman into performing that little show for us. It all happened as in a dream--one minute we were all playing our kiddie games, the next minute we were standing there petrified after she'd darted off. We never discussed it, any of us kids, and for years afterwards I used to wonder whether I'd just hallucinated the whole thing.

So this is the woman who makes an appearance in my book as Shakuntala. She also has a bit part in a screenplay. And then there's this Laughing Yoni proposal. I love putting her into everything. She is a consummate performer on the instrument of her body. And then there's the masturbation which I accidentally discovered at that time without knowing what it was.

And then decades later along comes Cassandra. I keep using Cassandra as the code word, but of course it's your Cassandra, your persuasion, your cut, your music. That Mexican film Tivoli which I brought for you provides such a strange, undernourished comparison. And with Cassandra my body moved heaven and earth. She brought on the terror of recognizing a knowledge-language always already known yet forgotten for a very long time. This is the power of iconography--once you look, you know.

The taboos are instructions. They were never forbidden, but they were MARKED. They needed a guide across the threshold. We ejected the guides in ejecting the sexual mother. The hollow vessel of the mother is in fact the basic religion--the looking glass, the back of the closet, the rabbit hole.

Intimacy is such a knowing that we work insanely hard to keep it at bay. It's the destiny we're forever fleeing, the god we're forever forsaking.

Men no longer contemplate where they come from, but every mother of a son has been haunted by her son's infantile hard-on for her. It's so elemental. The penis is the eternal return. The curse of the man in an age of self-sufficiency.

Paul Ricoeur coined a phrase--"regress to progress." Regression is considered highly problematic in Western culture and mocked and discouraged ("unheroic," "selfish," etc). In Asia and elsewhere, it's an everyday source of renewal. Regress to progress. Retreat into infancy, retreat into an earlier way of knowing the world and being known by it, then emerge once again. Sleeping Beauty awakes.

Mar 2, 2006

You found her.

Mar 5, 2006

From The Muse to Ginu--

Cassandra showed up today. We spent a lovely day. Had Tequilas and ice cream. She will show me performing places all over the country. She said our show was a little tame and that she would go on a final show tour for me if I want, because she thinks she is the last of the real dancers. The young girls have no "animo" any more.

THE END