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“Stephen V2”

a profile by Jim McQuaid

Greensboro filmmaker Stephen van Vuuren, the force behind the creation of the important Triad Indie Filmmakers Network (TIFN) is on a journey and - because he is a filmmaker - he is planning to take us with him. The plans are ambitious because he is taking us with him to Saturn. The story of how this journey has unfolded is a fascinating one.

As a child in Knoxville, van Vuuren grew up within the beliefs and constraints of his family's religious cult (“it's a cult, but a benign one,” he'll tell you) which forbade the enjoyment of TV, movies, and pop music among other things. One positive aspect of those restrictions was that he read a lot, developing a passion for technology, airplanes, rockets and space exploration. He wanted to grow up to be an astronaut.

Despite the religious restrictions, his Father gave him a camera when he was ten years old. Taking pictures of all kinds became a

passionate outlet for the boy and the first step towards becoming a visual artist.

However, his world was upset when his family moved back to their native South Africa just as he was to enter high school. Van Vuuren survived high school by focussing on science. When he turned 17, he returned to America, asserting his young adult independence. The science focus had gotten him into MIT but, alas, he could not begin to afford the massive tuition.

Instead, as in the coming of age ritual of many young men, he rejected the rigid beliefs of his family and began to immerse himself in music, films and many of the things that had been forbidden.

When he finally saw Stanley Kubrick's film *2001: A Space Odyssey* with its elegant mix of outer space, music and inner space, it almost instantly filled Stephen with the desire to make movies. Within a short time, he was a student in the film program at UNCG, still taking lots of still photographs while developing his skills with film and video.

His still photographs from this period reflect the beginnings of a mature artistic vision. He's said that he tried to photograph things "from a different perspective." But the photographs don't really deal

with perspective in the ordinary sense; they deal with how the photographic process can transform things seen into something quite different.

Film school led to debt and debt to a “real job.” Having already discovered his inner geek, Stephen worked in the computer business and in corporate IT. His passion for film waned, though never totally left him. Meanwhile, his view of the universe and his own spirituality matured to a point somewhere between the certainties of his family and the equal certain but negative views of the teenager. Then in 1999 he returned to filmmaking on his own terms.

TIFN

In 2000 Stephen had a burst of energy. He shot the film *Soliloquy*. He worked on creating a local film organization. He crafted a beautiful video memory of life and a moon landing (*Sea of Tranquility* which was shown at the River Run Film Festival in 2004) from some old home movie footage he uncovered. He discovered Adobe After-Effects and began to master its many capabilities. And, in 2003, as luck brought together several elements, he was able to get the Triad Indie Filmmakers Network or TIFN as it is known off the ground.

This article cannot do justice to TIFN – that’s another article altogether. But let’s simply observe that while a number of other key

folks active in Greensboro were involved, van Vuuren created the web site, the mailing list, the monthly film showings and the energy. Whether a reflection of his feelings about corporate life or just because it was simpler, TIFN was born without any formal structure. Nevertheless, the energy set in motion in 2003 continues to resonate in Greensboro in a new wave of film showings and communal energy which is the heart and soul of this “organization.”

To Saturn and beyond

In 2003, van Vuuren sold a bunch of video gear to upgrade his equipment. Unfortunately, he was the victim of a now well-known Internet scam, the overseas bogus cashier’s check. He deposited the check, his bank credited his account and he shipped off his equipment, only to find that six weeks later the bank reversed the deposit. It was more than a financial loss for a filmmaker. It would be two years before he could afford another video camera.

But there was a silver lining to this cloud. Grounded, as he was, in still photography, computing and the nature of film, he began to experiment with making films from still photographs. Then, in July 2004, the Cassini spacecraft reached Saturn, orbiting that planet and began to send back an incredible series of images.

Everything began to fit together. The false starts, the academic experiences that didn't lead to degrees, the passion for technology and a wise humility in the face of the natural world all positioned van Vuuren perfectly for the work he was about to undertake. His scientific interest in space led him to both appreciate and understand the spacecraft imagery. His spiritual journey allowed him to see the images as a way to transform our experience of the universe in which we live. And his film and computer experience gave him the skills to come to grips with the challenges of presenting these fundamental but elusive feelings in a form that others could respond to.

While giving a class about film and video production, a student once remarked that Stephen didn't seem capable of making a film without a special effect in it. Stephen's insight about this is simple and profound: film itself is a special effect. After all, it's still photographs, presented to us rapidly enough that we think the picture is moving!

Outside In

Outside In is a meditation on what the universe can tell us if we will only listen. Using the Cassini imagery, voice, music and a pop image flood of biblical proportions, van Vuuren is crafting a work that is ambitious in both the technical and storytelling dimensions.

The technology of *Outside In* is a seamless mixture of digital film, computer graphics and the manipulation of still images to move the viewer through the rings of Saturn. The incredible detail of the source images from Cassini and van Vuuren's technical prowess have lead him to create the entire work in "4K" resolution, a level of detail found today primarily in high-end post-production systems used in feature filmmaking. In addition to simple high resolution, van Vuuren has developed a unique process (he refers to it as "2.75D" rather than 3D) to move us through the rings of Saturn.

At the end of this journey we find we are looking back at ourselves and our civilization from the outside in, poised to gain a renewed sense of wonder and perspective about this gift we call life. And, with a bit of luck, we may find van Vuuren's vision and technical realization a perfect fit for the next generation of IMAX theaters.

More information at: www.outsideinthemovie.com