REÉ E E CINÉMA DU RÉEL GRAND PRIZE 2023

UP THEFT RINNER WHELL A CLUD

A film by **Harald Hutter**

<u>Prizes</u> Grand Prize — Cinéma du Réel 2023 Special Mention Loriden-Ivens / CNAP — Cinéma du Réel 2023

> Festivals World Premiere Cinéma du Réel 2023 USA Premiere Ann Arbor Film Festival 2023

"It isn't often that we encounter films that are simultaneously incredibly personal and deeply resonant on a universal level, but through the unforgettable imagery and profound honesty of this film, Hutter achieves it in this powerful and profound examination of the most precious human connections."

- International Cinephile Society



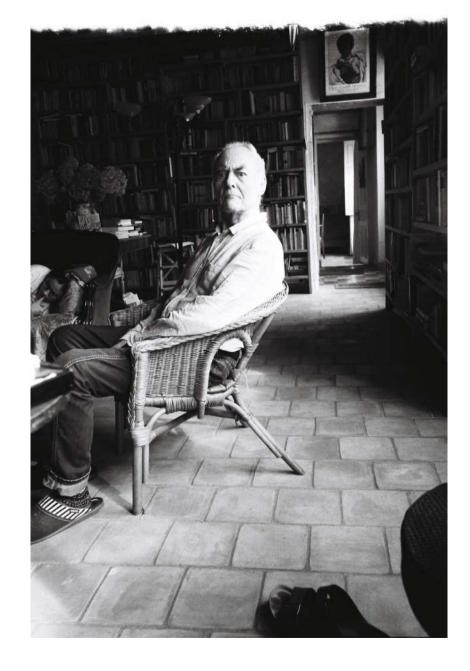
Logline:

Two days in the life of Horst, an elderly man whose life has been upended by dementia.



Synopsis:

Standing in front of the open window, a soft breeze playing through the curtains, an elderly man strangely sways to and fro. It is, for the most part, a puzzling behaviour, but one that still suggests some basic pleasure of the senses: feeling the stroke of the wind, joining in its dance. Another thing we know: the two senses by which the viewer experiences the scene are absent from this curious dance. The filmmaker's father, Horst, has almost lost his senses of sight and hearing as a result of a decline that is also chipping away at his memory. Once a loquacious professor, he has withdrawn into the semiseclusion of his diminished mind. He has become an "enigma", a "winter lake", as his wife puts it. The film is indeed as much a portrait of her as it is of him. In this quiet house where she must come to terms with this enigma, she writes down her impressions. Both protagonists are viewed through the eyes of their son, who films them with equal tenderness and the help of fifteen rolls 16 mm film. The camera, trying to blend into the environment as it shrinks and fades away, captures the movements kept alive by habit and observes those brought on by decline. In doing so, the son follows the mother's lesson, when she says: "There is no point in bringing you back to where our journey once began." A statement soon challenged by a beautiful scene which reveals that the memory of how the two first met has not vanished from Horst's mind. It's no surprise that the film's title takes its cue from it.



Interview with Harald Hutter by Holly Giesman Rosero on the occasion of the 60th Ann Arbor Film Festival:







Selected Press:



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The art of the documentary entails many varying styles, each one driven by a different intention, which makes it difficult to view non-fiction filmmaking as a genre, when in reality it consists of an endless array of directorial and artistic approaches. One of the more challenging methods of capturing reality on film comes in the form of those documentaries that are created through the process of trying to archive a human life – not necessarily exploring an individual's entire journey from cradle to grave (which usually falls under biographical documentary), but rather those that offer fragments of their everyday existence. These are very often increasingly personal films, and can usually be quite challenging based on their tendency to reflect some of the more challenging aspects of life. Up the River with Acid is an extraordinary film that is nestled comfortably in this style of filmmaking, with Harald Hutter telling a very personal story about Horst, a former professor of Political Science, and (perhaps more importantly) his father. Diagnosed with dementia some time previously, Horst navigates his life with increasing



difficulty, trying to make sense of these new changes, while struggling to maintain his mental stability, which is gradually eroding. This film depicts the haunting obstacles that the director's father faces, capturing the heartbreaking process in which a rote life becomes increasingly disordered and difficult, delivered in a simple but extremely touching examination of the volatility of life and the value in cherishing every moment.

Dementia is not an easy subject to discuss, but it has become a topic that many have actively attempted to explore, if only to bring awareness to the struggles faced by those afflicted with these awful conditions. What used to be viewed as mere senility and elderly eccentricity has become the source of many thoughtful and engaging films, and Up the River with Acid makes invaluable contributions to this steadily growing body of work that explores the subject with tact and honesty, affording sufferers the dignity they deserve. Hutter had a very personal connection with this subject, by virtue of the fact that his own father was afflicted with dementia, so it is only logical that his choice to make a film on the subject would be a nuanced, earnest depiction of the disease. The film is structured around two days in the life of Horst, with the director's camera recording his daily activities, as well as a few moments in which he musters enough energy to discuss his condition, or what he can acknowledge of it, which occur in meaningful but increasingly rare moments of lucidity. The film is a voyeuristic glimpse into the life of a man slowly losing his grasp on reality, but desperately doing whatever possible to maintain his sanity, aware and fearful of what will happen to him once he is on the other side of this illness entirely. Even beyond being made by the subject's son, Up the River with Acid is a deeply sympathetic work, and it never trivializes Horst's struggles or draws on our pity in a way that feels inauthentic or forced. Instead, it paints a vibrant portrait of a feisty and charismatic man who has become one of the many people diagnosed with this disease, but who continues to live a fruitful life. This documentary portrays the aching beauty of repetition

and routine, something that will only continue to erode the further this illness progresses.

However, a cursory glance at Hutter's previous work shows that he is not a filmmaker who condenses his films to a single subject, and that they are often focused on more than just the themes presented on the surface. The fact that this is about the director's father is not just an incidental concept that explains how he was given such close access to a dementia patient. Over the course of the film, we discover that this is as much about living with dementia as it is about family and human connection. The film has the appearance of a home movie, both visually and in how Hutter captures the quiet and intimate moments in the life of his family. Interspersed between scenes that show his father's struggles with his disease are poetic interludes, in which the director's mother Franciney Prévost (and Horst's wife of many decades) recounts her inner feelings and insecurities, delivered in voiceover and her native French, a language Horst admittedly doesn't speak well, almost as if she is trying to keep her true sadness a secret from the man to whom she has devoted her life. This choice highlights the multicultural nature of the family, and adds a level of complexity to the film, showing the lengths to which her love for her husband extends as she watches him suffer from an incurable disease. These poetic testimonials conceal the sadness and heartbreak that comes with seeing a loved one fade away, as well as demonstrating how we all express our feelings about someone's impending demise differently. Franciney uses her striking odes to reflect on her relationship with her husband and their shared past, while the director makes use of his camera to capture the last vestiges of his father's life, documenting fragments that may not mean much in isolation, but when placed together create a vivid and heart-wrenching portrait of a son who idolizes his father, and is simply hoping to record everything he can before he is fully enveloped by this illness.

Up the River with Acid is the kind of film in which the

deafening silences say more than spoken words - and there are many quiet interludes in which the film draws on the incredible impact of stillness to convey deeply moving statements on the nature of existence. It is unlikely we will ever see any work of art that fully encapsulates the experience of living with dementia, and those of us who are fortunate enough to not have this devastating disease can likely never imagine the true scope of what its victims have to endure. However, what we have been given on occasion are films such as this, made by or based around the experiences of those who had loved ones who were diagnosed with this illness, their own relationship with dementia being profoundly heartbreaking, since they slowly watched someone they care about gradually slip away. Hutter is an immensely gifted filmmaker, and his artistic integrity and ability to capture every detail of the subjects he chooses to explore make him a truly empathetic filmmaker. However, Up the River with Acid rarely feels like a film he made for anyone other than himself and his family, since it primarily plays out as a series of intimate moments in their lives, an attempt to capture whatever they can of their beloved father and husband before he is entirely lost. The fact that he allowed us access to these visual memories is incredible, since the intimacy and honesty with which he pieces this film together is extraordinary. Hutter crafts a quiet, beautiful tribute to his father, shaping seemingly inconsequential moments to reflect his position as both a son and a filmmaker, in that order. It isn't often that we encounter films that are simultaneously incredibly personal and deeply resonant on a universal level, but through the unforgettable imagery and profound honesty of this film, Hutter achieves it in this powerful and profound examination of the most precious human connections.

This entry was posted in 2023 - Cinéma du Réel, Cinéma du Réel, Reviews and tagged Cinéma du réel, Franciney Prévost, Harald Hutter, Up the River With Acid. Bookmark the permalink.

This too shall pass...

AGEING / How to capture an ending life in two days? BY NICK HOLDSWORTH / CINÉMA DU RÉEL, PARIS





Up the River With Acid Director: Harald Hutter Producer: Harald Hutter, Florian Hutter, Maison Gai Saber Country: France

In British avant-garde novelist B.S. Johnson's 1971 novel about dementia and old age, *House Mother Normal*, the conversations, thoughts, views and inner worlds of a group of eight people in an old peoples' home are vividly illustrated in unorthodox and striking ways. The 'House Mother' of the title – modelled on Johnson's own – displays an increasing inability to communicate. The reader becomes aware of the advancing state of her dementia through the pace at which words disappear from her recollections and speech until, finally, only a word is seen here and there on the page.

When the blinds draw

Harald Hutter's gentle film of two days in the life of his father, whose world is shrinking as he loses his sight, hearing and mind, *Up The River With Acid*, attempts to reach into life as the blinds are drawn down on it.

Composed of a series of painterly stat-

ic-point views, Hutter's camera explores the grand old country house where his father, Horst and mother, Franciney Prévost, are spending the summer. The house is in a state of genteel dilapidation; the torn wallpaper and patches of bare walls are less a work in progress than a lesson in neglect.

Horst, a German-born academic who met Franciney in Canada when their only common language was German (she's French, but her English was still rudimentary), lived a full and intellectually curious life. There is still much love between them, even if Franciney needs to prompt Horst to remember the circumstances of their first meeting – when they walked along a river up to a waterfall and took acid, hence the beguiling title of this short documentary.

This is his life and one in which the fabric, the continuity, is coming apart.

Non-intrusive

The director is attentive but not intrusive. The opening sequences show his father enjoying a warm breeze blowing in over curtains at an open window, his eyes shut, and his face turned aloft to catch the gentle zephyr. A trapped swallow flutters around the room, a symbol of all that is being closed down within the elderly man. A small, blond boy sits at a messy old desk and draws with a pencil. The circle of life is here – what memories will that child have of these days when he is older? What memories does Horst have now of his long, productive life?

Anthony Hopkins rightly won acclaim for his portrayal of a man descending into dementia in *The Father*. Horst Hutter is not famous, nor an actor. This is his life and one in which the fabric, the continuity, is coming apart. He potters around the kitchen, taking cutlery from a drawer, then putting it back. He sits in a chair, looking into space. Sometimes he practices meditation and chanting, though it sounds like he has forgotten how to do it. He is alive and physically present but exists in a world largely inaccessible to others.

There are moments of lucidity: the gentle, almost unbearably fragile conversation with his wife in English where she prompts him to remember that first day when acquaintance stood at the door of love. His face lights up, and he does recall more than you would think. Her pain as her husband slowly slips from her grasp is momentarily assuaged. This is a film to watch with the heart fully open; tears and compassion are the likely response.

How to capture a life in two days? How to convey the passing of that life? How to stay focused when you are both a filmmaker and a son? The film begs more questions than it answers, but clues to the life lived are given in a series of old photographic images of the younger Horst and Franciney, family and friends. Eventually, this too shall pass, as a pile of 16mm stock burning into ashes suggests. As a tribute to one life, it is a paeon to all life.

The Michigan Daily

FILM

Ann Arbor Film Festival 2023: 'Up The River With Acid'

by Maya Ruder March 29, 2023



This image was taken from the official trailer for "Up the River With Acid," distributed by Harald Hutter.

Harald Hutter (Léthé) chose the Ann Arbor Film Festival as the stage for the North American premiere of "Up The River With Acid," partnering with the University of Michigan Department of Romance Languages and Literatures to bring audiences this documentary feature film. Hutter is a Paris-based filmmaker <u>known</u> for his short films, which have won him Best Short Experimental Film at the 68th Edinburgh Film Festival and the Aesthetica Film Festival.

Hutter chose a deeply personal subject for his first feature: his mother (Francine-Y Prévost) and father (Horst Hutter). "Up The River With Acid" follows Horst, a former professor who suffers from dementia, in his retirement in his wife's French village. Francine is a poet, and the audience is privy to some of her moving words that carry profound longing and tenderness. In our brief conversation after the film's screening, she was as wise and lovely as she appears on-screen.

The camera acts as an onlooker. Horst and Francine exchange a significant amount of shared dialogue only once. Occasionally, Francine writing her poetry serves as narration — usually in the hushed company of her withdrawn husband. The film's primary mode of storytelling is through the eye of the camera — long takes of scenes inside the home and the surrounding village occupied by silence or the sounds of everyday life — birdsong, pencil dragging on paper, dishes and silverware, breathing.

Slow cinema often invites the viewer to explore an unconstrained space, but the primarily stationary camera that captures "Up The River With Acid" fixes our gaze — commanding our attention as a fly on the wall or a stray cat in the street. Static shots are generally used to build tension, but in this film, the technique creates intimacy between the audience and the subjects. Rather than imposing our curiosity on their privacy, we are immobile pillars shown only what is in frame. In the beginning of the film, Francine opens windows to let in light. When she moves out of frame, we remain stationary, our eyes fixed on the face of a bookshelf and an obscured view of the windows as the sounds of movement are heard in the background. We become fellow objects of the landscape, companions of the subjects rather than pervasive spectators. At the end of the film, we are backseat passengers to Francine and Horst — unable to clearly hear the words they share, only able to observe their playful interactions and loving glances.

Although Horst does not speak for the majority of the film, Hutter paints a meaningful and nuanced portrait of a dementia patient. Rather than attempting to form a dialogue with Horst, Hutter allows the senses to drive the documentary. Despite a partial loss of cognitive function, Horst demonstrates the memory he has of everyday sensations as he finds peace in the natural rhythms of life. He meditates, he shuffles around the kitchen for ingredients for porridge or a sandwich, he stands in front of an open window and moves with the wind, he strolls, he sits quietly, he lays still.

The endurance of both intellect and love are themes in "Up The River With Acid," intertwined in the film's subtle emotional climax when Francine and Horst — who we see separately for most of the film — share a memory. Francine stands with her arms around Horst, who sits in a chair. She reminisces about how they first met — a chance encounter that led to an "insane journey." Horst, engaging the most he has for the entire film, reveals that he remembers the beginning of their relationship — the waterfall, the cold, the phone call. She says the first time they met, he spoke about Friedrich Nietzsche in German, a language they did not yet share. An earlier extended shot focused on an article entitled "What was the cause of Nietzsche's dementia?" Hutter clearly means to draw a parallel between Nietzsche, a German philosopher, and Horst, who dedicated his career to academia. In our conversation, Francine told me this scene was entirely improvised.

Following Francine and Horst's conversation, an uninterrupted, steady shot shows the setting sun disappearing behind the spikes of grass that cover a rolling hill. The sunset — day's end — feels like a symbolic reminder of not just the passage of time but the beauty of it. Francine, in her writing, once declares she believes it is futile to attempt to relive or revisit the beginning in search of memory. In the end, however, this is what she does. In her poetry, she described taking Horst "back to where (their) journey once began," where the pleasure of nostalgia is rediscovered in the movement of swimming upstream through time and into the past.

Daily Arts Writer Maya Ruder can be reached at mayarud@umich.edu.

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Film Details: Runtime: 63 minutes Country: France Screening Format: DCP, 4K digital file Image: 1.66:1 Colour Sound: 5.1 mix Languages: French & English

- <u>Credits:</u> Written, Directed and Produced by Harald Hutter Co-Producers: Francine Prévost Hutter, Florian Hutter Associate Producers: Alex Nevill & Paul-Anthony Mille Cinematography: Alex Nevill Sound Design: Rob Walker Editing: Lucas Pandolfo & Harald Hutter Music: Eduardo Manzanares-Nyul Color grading: Jason Wallis



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