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The anthropological adventurer with camera in hand

Filmmaker and traveller Gaël Métroz has spent over a year and a half following in the footsteps of a Hindu holy man in India and Nepal. We catch up with the filmmaker from Valais on his return to Switzerland while in the middle of editing his film. A profile.

By Alain Wey

He focuses on far-away cultures, goes in search of the extraordinary and lives the present moment as intensely as possible. Once he has blended into his surroundings, he gets out his camera and becomes the observer who captures the fabric of time. Gaël Métroz is an indiscernible traveller. He leaves the tourist routes behind him and explores the high plateaus of central Asia. A director of documentaries for cinema and television, the Valais-born filmmaker has returned from an 18-month journey in India and Nepal where he followed the pilgrimage of a Hindu holy man, or sadhu. He is currently editing the film in Geneva, with its release in Swiss cinemas scheduled for the autumn. At a café in the city, this anthropological traveller recounts his adventures and epic tales.

From Africa to Asia

"I've been travelling non-stop since the age of 15", says Métroz, who grew up in the mountains and was born near the Great St Bernard Pass. "I set off as soon as I had the money. During my studies, I taught French Literature, Philosophy and Art History. I had found a job and everything had fallen into place. Just as it was about to become permanent, I panicked and bought a one-way ticket to Ethiopia."

Gaël Métroz has since travelled all over the world with his camera and only stops in Switzerland to edit his films before setting off again. "I never decide how long the journey will take and I only return when I have a story for my film", he adds. It may take six months, a year or even longer – the duration is determined by what happens en route. He adopts a spirit of travel that evolves into a certain lifestyle. After visiting Egypt, the Sudan and Ethiopia in 2004, Métroz released the documentary "L'Afrique de Rimbaud" (Rimbaud's Africa). He then undertook a journey following in the footsteps of the writer Nicolas Bouvier who set off from Switzerland and crossed Asia by car in the 1950s. He spent 13 months passing through Turkey, Iran, Paki-

stan, China and India, by train, by bus, on foot and on the back of a camel. He gradually deviated from the route taken by the writer and followed the paths of the nomads. The film "Nomad's Land" came out in the cinemas in 2008 and won several prizes, including best film at the prestigious San Francisco International Film Festival.

"I generally produce my best work in countries that I have not decided to visit", he reveals. "For instance, I was in Iran and I had to cross Pakistan to reach India. It was really hot in 2005. We had to move quickly to reach the more familiar terrain of India. I wandered into the mountains and discovered the Kalash people. I returned to their village several times after that, for the last time in 2009." This anthropological immersion produced the documentary "Kalash, les derniers infidèles du Pakistan" (Kalash - Pakistan's last infidels), which is a vibrant homage to an ethnic group at risk of disappearing under pressure from Pakistan's Muslim population.

In the footsteps of a hermit

"I've wanted to make a film about a sadhu since 2005", he explains. "I had visited Nepal several years beforehand for a very long trek in the mountains. Lots of sadhus made the same journey, but barefoot and without a rucksack. I was enthralled by this completely sparse way of living." Métroz decided to find a sadhu to feature in his film and to follow him to Kumbha Mela, a Hindu religious festival held every 12 years in Haridwar in the north-west of India, bringing together 70 million pilgrims. "I met him at the source of the Ganges in Gangotri in the Himalayas. He was in the middle of moving stones to clear a pathway in front of his cave, and I lent him a hand. I then returned every day to establish a pattern."

The filmmaker, who also speaks Hindi, moved into a neighbouring cave situated 3,500 metres above sea level. The sadhu had been living as a hermit for eight years and

had dreamed of going to Kumbha Mela. "At the same time, he had become solitary and was frightened of returning to the outside world." The Valais-born director offered to accompany him and help him undertake his journey, provided he could also film him. This agreement was to bind the two men together for much longer than they imagined, as a year later they found themselves in the mountains of Nepal. Métroz recalls: "His pilgrimage took us as far as Mustang on the border with Tibet, which is also known as the 'forbidden kingdom'. I did not set out to make a film about Hinduism – what interested me was the human experience. This man's life became increasingly captivating, because he really changed after leaving his cave. You will have to watch the film to find out what type of new man he became." Putting up with hunger, thirst, cold, altitude, sleeping outdoors and walking for over six hours a day carrying a 30-kilo rucksack – Métroz's adventure was anything but easy. "When you travel with a sadhu, you don't have any food", he says. "You live virtually without any money, you sleep outdoors and you adapt to your companion's daily rhythm." After a journey lasting a year and a half, Gaël Métroz has finally begun the task of editing the 240 hours of film he amassed while he was away – in order to capture the essence of his travels on the silver screen.

The university of life

"Travelling has made me lose my romantic view of the world", explains Métroz. "Paradise lost and the myth of the noble savage are literary ideas that I used to really cherish. Now I've become a much simpler human being, more inquisitive and more willing to listen in a positive way." Each journey has been life-changing. In this respect, the words of Nicolas Bouvier have particular resonance for him: "You think you are making a trip, but soon it is making you – or unmaking you." (The Way of the World). "I am becoming less dumb all the time", he says, smiling. "I set off

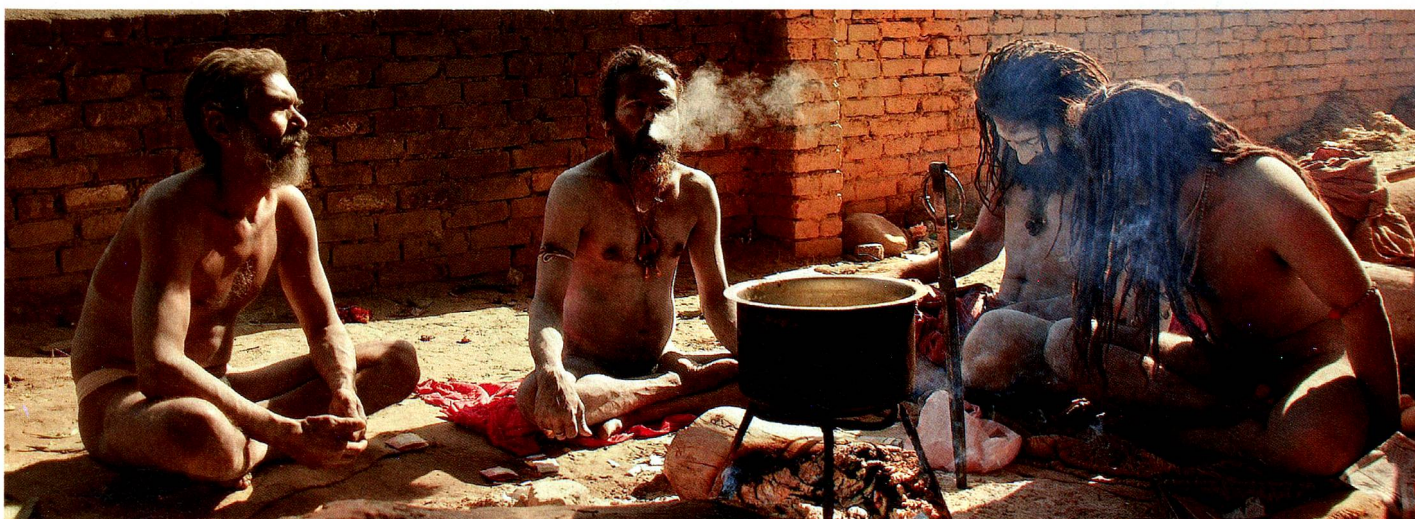


Gaël Métroz making the film "Sādhu"



On the Thorong La pass at an altitude of 5,416 metres

Below: The sadhu's camp. The holy fire must stay lit at all times



with lots of questions, and by the time I return here, they have all vanished. My philosophy is no longer found in books. It has become very simple. I live for the present, the here and now. I can no longer do things half-heartedly. I've become extremely single-minded about everything." In other words, he dedicates himself entirely to what he is currently working on and does not allow himself to be distracted by other things. Métroz's films also reveal his fascination with the sparsely ways of living. "Nomads live like they do because they cannot always carry everything on their backs. It's a way of ensuring minimum weight. And a sadhu's life is even more extreme."

New adventures

Anything but the conventional filmmaker, Gaël Métroz has plenty of other projects under his belt. For example, he has written fictional and non-fictional works, and produced copious travel diaries. However, while he has published some short stories, he has not yet managed to get that big break with a publisher. "The literary gods are still sitting on their clouds scoffing at me", he jokes. Other documentary ideas are in the pipeline, but these will remain on the back-burner until the film "Sâdhu" had its cinema release. What, then, does this "observer of lives" ultimately aim to achieve? The answer is as simple as it is complex: "I just want to be a decent person and to try to meet other decent people." Inspiring words.

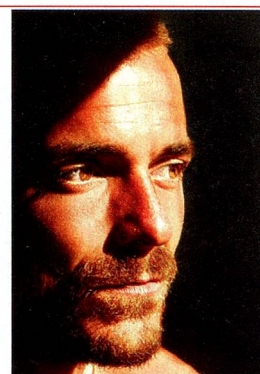
ALAIN WEY is an editor at "Swiss Review"

SPOTLIGHT

Gaël Métroz was born in 1978 in the village of Liddes (1,346 m) to the north of the Great St Bernard Pass. He studied Philosophy, French and Art History at the University of Lausanne. In 2003, he was the first Swiss to win a literary prize at the Concours International de la Nouvelle, and he was awarded the Prix de la Sorge in 2004 for his essay "Mat". As a freelance journalist for print media and television, he works particularly on the Télévision Suisse Romande programme "Passe-moi les jumelles".

Filmography: "L'Afrique de Rimbaud" (Rimbaud's Africa), 52 mins, Elytel, 2005; "Nomad's Land", 90 mins, Tipi'Mages Productions, 2008; "Kalash, les derniers infidèles du Pakistan" (Kalash - Pakistan's last infidels), 52 mins, Tipi'Mages Productions, 2010; "Sâdhu", to be released in autumn 2012, 90 mins, Tipi'Mages Productions.

<http://gaelmetroz.wordpress.com/> / www.nomadsland-lefilm.com



Above: The dance of the monks at a monastery in Lo Manthang

Far left: To demonstrate the dominance of his will over his body, this sadhu has held his hand up for the past 17 years

Left: On the high plateau in the former kingdom of Mustang

