

Belgian cinema – supplement to NR 106 May 2005

Congo River
by Thierry Michel

All along the Congo River

Thierry Michel is currently finishing the lengthy process of editing Congo river, a film that follows the path of the river that lends geographical coherence to the immense African state of the Congo. His epic journey reveals a people who are trying to rebuild their lives along a river that once lent them unity.

There is little need to present the past work of documentary director Thierry Michel, a filmmaker who was born in Charleroi, and whose first efforts were portraits of the social, working class memories of the people from that heavily industrialised city (*Pays Noir, pays route, Hiver 60*). He then branched out into wider portraits of the world, from Brazil (*Gosses de Rio*) to Iran (*Iran, sous le voile des apparences/ Iran: Veiled Appearances*), not forgetting Guinea (*Donka, radioscopie d'un hôpital africain/Donka, X-ray of an African Hospital*). But he's long been fascinated by the Congo, as Congo River, the fourth film he has dedicated to this multi-faceted former Belgian colony demonstrates. *Zaire, le cycle du serpent*, looked at the arrogance of power and at popular revolt; *Les derniers colons* showed that predatory but ambitious spirit that marked so many Belgian expatriates, and continues to do so; and *Mobutu roi du Zaire/Mobuto, King of Zaire*, was an almost Shakespearian portrait of the dictator who befriended so many Western leaders. *Congo River* is a road movie in boats, lorries, bicycles and canoes along the river, a hunt for Africa, its history and its daily truth. It's also the personal quest of a filmmaker who wonders why, each time he had thought he had found the answer, he keeps being grabbed by the compulsion to make another film about the country that is his passion. Thierry Michel willingly admits that this trip to the original heart of darkness still held innumerable surprises: "I was amazed by the extent to which the war weighs down the inhabitants of the country. I was also surprised by the return of older religions, which have many new evangelists. In one way or another, the irrational is never far away, as the film will show through a portrayal of one thing we find difficult to understand – witch doctors who are still children." Another thing that amazed him was the vital energy that continues to infuse the country, and which means that it is still possible to look to the country's

future with a measure of optimism. "What I wanted to show, beyond the darkness and the violent, tragic history that haunts the continent, and which does play a major role in the film, was happiness and hope, which often come through in songs and rituals." This was the first time that Thierry Michel has shot in high definition, over a three-month period, with the help of Michel Tschy for the photography and Lieven Callens for the sound. The remainder of the crew (assistants, guides and interpreters) were Congolese. Les Films de la Passerelle, under Christine Pireaux, a company that has remained faithful to Michel for some years now, were the first backers of what is now an extremely international coproduction, and which also now includes Les films d'ici, a famous Parisian production company with many documentaries behind it. The film should be ready by the autumn, and like most of Michel's previous efforts, will be first released in the cinema. The available images, which are moving and beautiful, show that its merits are nothing less.

Pierre Duculot