

'Spira Mirabilis': Venice Review

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Courtesy of Venice Film Festival

The Bottom Line

Like watching infinity.

An Italian feature documentary shot around the world examines man's thirst for immortality and perfection.

Italian documakers Massimo D'Anolfi and Martina Parenti seem out of their depth in the hyper-abstract *Spira Mirabilis*, two hours of almost wordless edited footage shot around the world. At first viewing (and how many people will watch it twice?) very disparate shots follow each other in a random hodge-podge of fleeting, fast-moving images from which the viewer struggles to find meaning. As the frustration grows, interest in the often beautiful camerawork slips away. While the film's premiere in Venice competition will raise the Italian filmmakers' profile, this is the kind of ambitious experimental cinema that is a major turn-off for unprepared audiences and would be better screened in special sections or museums.

D'Arnolfi and Parenti have earned a loyal critical following with rigorous but less difficult works like *The Castle*, tracking a year of daily operations at Milan's Malpensa airport, and their much-admired 2013 doc *Dark Matter*, which examined the consequences of weapons testing in Sardinia. The current film shows some deep thinking but surprisingly minimal will to communicate with the audience. What is it about? That question seems incapable of being answered, until in the final scenes some consensus seems to emerge around the theme of immortality and how it might be achieved biologically and artistically.

Another hypothesis is that the film is about man's search for perfection. The title comes from the famous logarithmic golden spiral discovered by Descartes, said to embody perfection because it grows by a factor of pi, the golden ratio.

An excellent press book written by Richard Lormand untangles this avalanche of images into four intercut stories, which regrettably are not clearly delineated in the film. In one thread, the ancient wisdom of the Lakota Sioux is passed down through a female shaman and two men,

Moses Brings Plenty and Leola One Feather. While they contemplate how their lands have been usurped and destroyed, across the globe a Japanese marine biologist raises “immortal jellyfish” in his lab and studies their ability to rejuvenate themselves and be born again.

Great mystery is made out of the production of a steel percussion instrument called a Hang by two absorbed craftsmen. The same attitude of guessing surrounds the restoration of some crumbling statues that look like cemetery pieces, but turn out to be part of the Milan cathedral. However, the film leaves out a crucial piece of information, which is that the Duomo is endowed with perpetual restoration funds and has been updating itself for the last 600 years, thus it too is part of the immortality theme. But the viewer would just have to know.

The most pleasurable experience is listening to French actress Marina Vlady recite Jorge Luis Borges’ story “The Immortal” in a spell-binding voice. If only the rest of the film had her bell-like clarity.

D’Arnolfi’s cinematography is sensitive and often stunningly original, ranging freely from the micro-world of tiny cells to soaring cathedral shots and breath-taking landscapes. Adding another abstract voice is Massimo Mariani’s pleasantly varied experimental score.

Production companies: Montmorency Film, Lomotion in association with RAI Cinema, SRF, SRG

Cast: Marina Vlady

Directors, screenwriters, editors: Massimo D’Arnolfi, Martina Parenti

Producers: Massimo D’Arnolfi, Martina Parenti, Louis Matare, David Fonjallaz

Director of photography: Massimo D’Arnolfi

Music: Massimo Mariani

World sales: The Match Factory
121 minutes
