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WHERE IS ROCKY II?: AN INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR PIERRE BISMUTH

WRITTEN BY LILLY BALL
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"The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart," Albert Camus concluded in his 1942 philosophical essay, Le Mythe de Sisyphe *(The Myth of Sisyphus). "One must imagine Sisyphus happy." The essay itself tackles the philosophy of the absurd: our useless search for meaning in a chaotic world devoid of order or God. Yeah, Camus was kind of a downer.*

For many of us, those immutable words toll through our heads multiple times per day: stuck in traffic, deciding whether to order the baked kale chips or the macrobiotic bowl, driving our kids to soccer practice, constantly struggling with the apparitional fear that our lives have amounted to a plateau of servitude. Our jobs, our death-defying commutes, family, friends, the wristwatch to which we find ourselves tethered—these are our proverbial boulders, and the mountain is all around us. Without Camus' words—Sisyphus, happy—many of us would descend into madness simply waiting in line at the supermarket. Or maybe that's just me.

*For Brussels-based contemporary artist and writer (*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*) Pierre Bismuth, the journey is not only a means to an end, but an end in itself. Take, for example, his latest project,* Where Is Rocky II? *—a film about his quest to find a fake rock hidden in the desert. In 1976, artist Ed Ruscha sculpted said rock, Rocky II, and placed it in an undisclosed location in the Mojave, and in that location it has since remained. Bismuth, who has launched an Indiegogo campaign to help finance the film, hired a private investigator to comb the vast Southern Californian wilds and help find the rock. "Planting this rock," says Bismuth's disembodied head in the film's appropriately unusual trailer, "was Ruscha's invitation to find it." It's a predictably daunting task, trying to find a fake rock hidden somewhere among 47,877 square miles of real ones. But that's the point—and the quest itself becomes an artistic extension of Ruscha's original piece, taken over and enlightened by Bismuth. In other words, bring on the boulders—real, fake, and figurative.*



How did you come to find out about Rocky II?
Ten years ago, somebody gave me a VHS with a BBC documentary from 1979 about Ed Ruscha. A very nice documentary, 28 minutes to be exact, in which you see Ruscha working in his studio on this fake rock called *Rocky II*. No, actually! It's not exactly like that. You see him first removing a rock from the desert, a huge fake boulder that he brings back to his studio. He tells us this fake boulder is called "Rocky II," and explains that since it was created out of papeir-mâché and chicken wire, animals started eating it. So he is doing another one, "Rocky II," this time with resin and desert gravel, much more solid, and [he] put's it back at the exact same place.

What attracted you to Ed Ruscha's art in the first place?
I think at first I was really into his books, but I should point out that, strangely enough, the film is not really about his work nor Ed Ruscha. It is just about the existence of this very specific piece, and this piece is really unique and unusual in his body of work. So I have the feeling that if people go to see my film thinking they will learn something about Ed Ruscha's artwork, they might be somehow disappointed.

"THE FUNNY THING IS, ON THE SEARCH FOR *ROCKY II* I FOUND THE BIG LEBOWSKI."

What is the film about?
I think it's really about how the different characters start building up their own understanding of *why* an object exists. It starts from pure, fictional thoughts eventually to reach the truth.

It's 90% documentary, we follow the detective [Michael Scott] and we follow the screenwriters, D.V. DeVincentis [*Gross Pointe Blank, High Fidelity*] and Anthony Peckham [*Sherlock Holmes, Invictus*] trying to find the story. One guy is trying to find the rock and the other guys are trying to find the story. And they join somewhere, but for different reasons.



How did you begin developing the documentary?
Ed Ruscha is such a famous artist when you are studying art, you know him before you even like or dislike him. I forgot about him until I came upon [the BBC documentary] that I thought was really nice. My film is as much about the documentary as Ed Ruscha and the fake rock. At first I thought it was a great piece, and then I started to think maybe he made that thing just for show. I was right and wrong. I can't say too much.

The funny thing is, on the search for *Rocky II* I found the Big Lebowski. We discovered one guy who was very close with Ruscha and this guy is called Jim Ganzer. He is the guy who made the [fake rock] with Ed Ruscha. The guy is really fantastic, very charming, really funny, and extremely cool. He's smoking pot all day. Ruscha called him because he's an old friend, and because he's a surfer, he knew how to use resin. That's how he got involved with *Rocky II*. But what I discovered later is Jim Ganzer is not only a friend of Ruscha, but also a friend of John Milius [*Magnum Force, Apocalypse Now*] who is a friend of the Coen Brothers. Sometime in the '80s, Milius said to the Coen Brothers *you have to meet this guy—he's really interesting, a great character, he's got plenty of interesting stories and he's got a very nice way of talking.* So they spent some time with Ganzer, and out of that meeting they created that character of the Dude from *The Big Lebowski*.

Do you think you've taken a joke too literally? Is this the point maybe? A tour-de-force?
That's right, it is exactly the point. The idea is to ignore any kind of sensible point of view, considering that maybe it is only a witty joke from Ruscha, but, on the contrary, to be dead serious about trying to find the rock. And the best way to do so is to hire a very serious and skilled detective to search for it. But again this is only one part of the film.

It's funny going from one film, you get another one and that's the beauty of the search. The discovery of the rock, for me, doesn't matter so much. But I think if I wasn't serious about searching for the rock it wouldn't work. That's why we collected this detective. He doesn't care to understand why, he just does the job. It's not his problem. I pay him for the job, he does the job, that's it. He doesn't care about my reason.

It's just another investigation for him.
Exactly!



Would you call this quest a sort of absurdist adventurism?
The Rocky exists for sure! No doubt about it, but does it make this quest less absurd? I don't think so. I believe that it is what an artist is supposed to do: not take things for granted and just do things even if it seems totally absurd or useless.

If I had a simple way to pitch the film I would say that it is about a film director (me) hiring a private eye on an impossible task—finding a fake rock in the middle of the desert. But what the detective does not know is that the film director does not necessarily want to find the rock. He mainly uses the detective's search as source material to make a film. Indeed as soon as the detective starts his search, the director takes notes and hands them over to a duo of Hollywood screenwriters and asks then to write a script.

Why is making the documentary important to you?
"Where truth is unlikely, legend begins." This is the signification of this film. I am interested in showing the way we can speculate and develop ideas and fantasy up to the point that it is no longer important to know if the initial object of speculation, the starting point of this speculation, was true or not. Because in the end it is the potential of what has been produced through this elaboration that is important. In that sense, the work of the screenwriters is very important to me, and I do not think I would be at all interested in just doing the detective search only.

Did you find what you were looking for?
[*Laughs*] I want to leave that for the film, but I found more than what I was looking for, that's for sure.

Albert Camus tells us, "One must imagine Sisyphus happy" Are you happy?
Very much so, and even more since I have started this film.

Pierre Bismuth is a French contemporary artist. He lives and works in Brussels. He won the best original screenplay at the 77th Academy Awards along with Michel Gondry and Charlie Kaufman for the movie Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind. *Visit his* **Indiegogo** *Campaign and pledge your support for* Where is Rocky II?.

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ABOUT LILLY BALL
Lilly Ball joined FORTH Magazine as Art Director/Brand Manager in the Fall of 2014. She is interested in writing, people, and the forest. lilly@forthmagazine.com.