

Chris Marker Meets Werner Herzog In Brilliant, Quirky Rodent Documentary 'Rat Film' — Locarno Review

Theo Anthony's first feature, which focuses on the history of the rat problem in Baltimore, is a unique blend of poetic intrigue and scholarly precision.

[Eric Kohn](#)



"Rat Film"

"Before the world became the world, it was an egg. Inside the egg was dark. The rat nibbled the egg and let the light in. And the world began." That opening stanza in Theo Anthony's remarkable non-fiction endeavor "[Rat Film](#)" sets the stage for a movie that brilliantly defies categorization. Anthony's feature-length debut careens from scientific observation and historical overview to spiritual inquiry with a freewheeling approach that never ceases to surprise, even as it maintains a cogent thesis. Both a

chronicle of the rat infestation plaguing the city of Baltimore and a broader assessment of the class problems plaguing its development, "Rat Film" manages to say something real and immediate in a fresh and inventive voice.

At the same time, Anthony's approach falls in line with established [documentary](#) traditions. The eccentric, wandering reflections throughout the film, offered in a monotonous female voiceover narration, recall Werner Herzog's discursive technique. But Anthony's complex layering of materials falls closer to the essay films of Harun Farocki and Chris Marker. The film alternates between quirky, deadpan observations, peculiar cutaways and more straightforward investigative journalism for a unique blend of poetic intrigue and scholarly precision. Not every fragment fits neatly with the next one, but "Rat Film" offers the elevated thrill of unpredictability. The same movie that follows self-appointed rat exterminators wandering the streets with baseball bats also features virtual reality sequences of rat mazes, archival photographs of Baltimore's lower class neighborhoods and maps breaking down various statistics of urban development.

"Rat Film" is the latest example of Anthony's provocative and insightful approach to representing disenfranchised tales. His 2014 short "Chop My Money" followed a tough-minded kid on the streets of Eastern Congo by remaining within his perspective and letting him tell his own tale. "Rat Film" goes to similar lengths for its rats — and, by extension, the long history of classism they're designed to represent. It's a bold gamble that sometimes feels a touch obvious, but mostly achieves a sharp clarity of vision.

A portrait of social entrapment in the 20th century, the movie chronicles the development of wealthy neighborhoods in Baltimore and the ghettoization of its black population to the point where the community has remained in perennial disrepair. Anthony lays out the film's prolonged metaphor in an early scene, filming a rat hopelessly attempting to free itself from a trash can. The narrator puts it bluntly: Rats can jump an average of 32 inches; Baltimore trash cans are 34 inches high. It's a lost cause.

Linked together by an awe-inspiring orchestral score, "Rat Film" keeps evolving as it moves along. Anthony shifts from observational storytelling to wry commentary on the claustrophobic nature of a rats' worldview, including a virtual reality simulation from the perspective of a rodent in a maze. Confronting the risk of a heavy-handed metaphor, Anthony compliments it with a historical foundation. He revisits John Calhoun's study of "the behavioral sink," which used rat behavior to explore how much space human society requires to thrive — a systematic process divorced from individual experience that nevertheless gave rise to the city's current structure.

Another central character is Kurt Richter, the so-called "pied piper of Baltimore," who launched the government's first pest control program in the early twentieth century. Modern-day footage of the city streets show the fruits of their labor: a town that knows how to combat the rats even as they continue to multiply. The symbolic nature of the situation doesn't remain beneath the surface. "There ain't never been a rat problem in Baltimore," says a veteran exterminator. "It's a people problem."

"Rat Film" veers from existential pontifications ("Does the blind rat dream?") to heavily-researched breakdowns of Baltimore's demographic history. It's a striking combination of analysis and creative innovation that communes with the past and present, uniting them as a beautiful, absurdist tone poem about the struggles facing those dealt less fortunate hands in life. With the final, harrowing image of a snake consuming a helpless rodent infant, "Rat Film" points to a tragedy that stretches beyond socioeconomic dysfunction to encompass the inherent chaos dooming even the most innocent creatures.

Grade: A-

"Rat Film" premiered at the 2016 Locarno Film Festival. It is currently seeking distribution.