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In Real Life (Or Elsewhere)

Om kreativa processer och parallella verkligheter i dokumentärfilm

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Kirsi Nevanti

IN REAL LIFE

Essays
on creative processes
and parallel realities
in documentary film

Stockholm Academy of Dramatic Arts

(OR ELSEWHERE)

**IN REAL LIFE
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Produced by
Stockholm Academy of Dramatic Arts

In Real Life (Or Elsewhere)

by Kirsi Nevanti

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Reality isn't what it appears to be. Contexts are not always clear and visible. People don't always say what they really mean. And they don't always mean what they say. When life is your stage manager, anything can happen. I often say, life is hard, my head is harder. Making documentaries is not for the faint-hearted. Know Thyself is a motto to live by. These essays are about the creative processes and the parallel realities of documentary film. In other words, I have outlined thoughts about the part of reality that I am familiar with, the mental landscape in which I as a filmmaker move. Writing is a particularly strenuous way of thinking, as Professor Ingela Josefson likes to say. I take the liberty of adding: "making films is a particularly strenuous way of thinking and formulating the countless mysteries of existence."

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One overcast morning

In the beginning

The morning is quite overcast; I'm walking along Katarinavägen in Stockholm, camera in my backpack, not knowing if I'll be able to use it today. Usually I'm out with a photographer and sound tech, but today I'm scouting—nose to the ground, trying to see what's going on. I'm unbearably tired today. Even before today, the process has been long and the topic isn't particularly cheerful. Why did my friend have to die, and why did I have to start thinking about what would have happened if he had wound up homeless on the streets of Stockholm? Once again I curse the nagging question that won't leave me alone. How would he have handled life on

the street? What would his days have been like? How would he deal with matters like love, belonging, children and the loss of a home? Because that's what's at stake.

As I write these lines, mental images flit by—memories and reality, dreams and nightmares. My friend never ended up on the street; he died on the parquet floor of his flat on Roslagsgatan one August day in 1999, just a month before he was to be evicted. Now, several years later, I walk along Katarinavägen with my camera, my burden of memories and my task for the day. I just want to see what early morning looks like outside the shelter, nestled into the rock wall halfway out to the Viking Line terminal.

I cross the railway tracks, seeing all the people already in place, and take a seat on a bench with my back to the city. There are tonnes of people, most of them lying on the ground, covered by a sleeping bag or a few bits of cardboard, some sitting half-asleep,

some talking quietly or just smoking. All of us are waiting.

The homeless people are waiting for morning to come, meaning office hours, when the door of the charity organisation's café would open wide, letting them come in and get cleaned up and warm. People are already familiar with me; some look away, but most greet me cheerily. They know I'm working on a film starring two of them. Neither Marina nor Pontus lives directly on the street; they have their caravans and in general they make sure to have a little more shelter, professionals that they are. Lying out on the street in the public eye is not something that either Pontus or Marina would ever consider.

But we have other pictures to take too. Images of the part of the city that never sleeps—or sleeps poorly. Unprotected, in temporary company. Just the thought of it makes me shiver. The city is so beautiful, and it's beautiful even to those who sleep out in the cold.

The hours pass. Suddenly, I'm aware of someone watching me. He stands close to the door, leaning against the wall and staring at me. I shiver. I've seen him before. One night he stood precisely there, pontificating about how the world works, on the political and private levels. It was obvious to me that he was dangerous. Regular homeless people aren't dangerous; in fact, they've always protected me. Even the time when a stoned young woman attacked me from behind and knocked me down, I immediately had a group of people around me pulling me up and sheltering me. And that incident really was an exception. Normally I could feel perfectly safe walking through the tunnels.

But now that dangerous man is looking at me. I know he's dangerous because I've heard the stories. I'm not afraid, but uncomfortable. He knows I'm a filmmaker. He knows people are afraid of him. He's capable of killing—I've been told that. He stands there staring at me, searching with his eyes, looking for my

camera. At least that's what it feels like. I don't shift my eyes, despite my discomfort. I won't give him the attention he wants.

Suddenly he strikes. He turns to a young man lying on the ground asleep, takes a step back for momentum and starts kicking him—in the body, in the head. His eyes are on me the whole time. No one moves, not even the air; everything is completely still. He keeps kicking, searching for my camera with his eyes. The camera is beside me on the bench. I grab it and run across the tracks towards Slussen. I fish up my mobile phone, call the police and report the incident. That's how I recall it. I didn't go back there. I went home.

Or to be honest, I really don't remember what I did. I have no memories at all between running off and calling the police, and being back at the City Mission.

Later I got a call from the police about what had happened; had I seen what happened

and who did it? By then, all the homeless people I knew who had been there had called me and asked me not to reveal the attacker's identity. It might not have any negative consequences for me, but those who slept on the streets and had been there that day might well have to pay for turning the man in. I wasn't a naive young filmmaker; I had spent so much time in environments where homeless people are that I felt this wish was completely justified.

If nothing else, I couldn't take that responsibility—just in case. I can lock my door. I don't sleep on the street or in a simple caravan that could be torched in the night.

So I didn't reveal the man's identity. Everyone knew anyway, even the staff at the City Mission, who opened the door just as I ran away and just as the young man, lying bleeding on the ground, received one final kick. They can tell, if they want... I think to myself.

I've always wondered, was it the presence of my camera that triggered the attack? Did he want to see if I was going to pick up the camera, finally make him an actor in my film? Would he have attacked the young man anyway if I hadn't been there? What happened to that young man—why did I never bother to find out (as I remember it)? And *what role did the camera play* in all of this?

When life is your stage manager, anything can happen. Making documentaries is not for the faint-hearted. But this paper is not about physical violence or the fear of it; it's about the creative process and the parallel realities of documentary film. The world I observe consists of tightly interwoven layers—so intricate, so complex and so divinely beautiful, how can I ever possibly understand it? Is it even possible to portray another person's world?

Reflections on space

The incident of the man being kicked while I and others watched—without lifting a finger—has gnawed at me for a long time. It's a story about the art of not backing down when it really matters; it's a story of the seeker who realises that truth is a chimera concealing many other stories, each just as true or untrue as any other.

One could say that documentary film is always a search for knowledge and insight, or as I prefer to define it: an interpretation of reality.

This comes to mind again on another day, as I approach a man lying on the ground under a pedestrian bridge just past the Eriksdalsbadet public pool, near an old railway track which leads to a tunnel where some of the city's homeless people live. I don't know this man, I can't see his face as he's lying there, but I see another man sitting a

bit further away, leaning against the wall at the bridge abutment. I see a hollow mattress regurgitating its springs where it lies, worn out and useless. The man is lying on his stomach, hiding his face, and his arms are stretched out across the ground alongside his head, as if he were trying to swim on land to escape the forces that are dragging him down.

The ground is already cold, but he doesn't have the energy to care.

Photographer Robert Nordström and I always ask permission to shoot footage, especially when dealing with people we don't know. We aren't sneaks. We do the same this time, talking to the man sitting against the wall. He regards us, sitting there at a distance, with curious eyes. When we approach, he says, in the slowest, calmest Finnish, "I recognise you. Last time you were here you asked if it was okay to film us. Most people just pull out their cameras without asking. I've made

films too. You know how I ended up here?”. His eyes lock on mine and he nods and says, “I was a social worker in Haninge. I listened too much to people’s problems, I took in too much! That’s how I ended up here.” Then he adds, “Go ahead and shoot, we don’t mind.”

We get ready. We shoot both video and 35 mm camera, and it takes a bit of time to get going. Suddenly the man lying on the ground moves; he gives a shout and his voice cuts through the air like a dull knife: “What do you know about my life? What do you know about my pain?!” Then he immediately drops back to sleep. Or retreats, disconnects his awareness, lets the soothing darkness fall. I’m not sure which. We don’t even have time to catch him on film. What I understand is the weight in his words. I feel chastised.

What do I know?

As a documentary filmmaker, I’m used to not knowing too much. The whole idea of

making a documentary—to me, as there are so many motives—is to explore unknown worlds. I try to understand, observe, interact, process, formulate, and eventually create a film. In the best scenario, the film takes us to another dimension, to an existential context. The film articulates the inexplicable, tries to help us understand the world of another—a place, a phenomenon, an era. In the best scenario, it reflects the whole of existence for just an instant, like poetry. An interpretation of reality is what a documentary filmmaker works with. Gaining knowledge about how we people live our lives is my job. I’m a “visibliser”.

Both photographer Robert Nordström and I feel that this shoot is one of the hardest ones we’ve been on. The goal of the documentary is to portray humans and the conditions they live in—in this specific case, what it’s like to survive on the street. I know very well what I don’t want: I don’t want to make a film about homelessness. I can’t stand it when

financiers say, “Aha, you’re making a film about street people!” I don’t want to confirm what we already know, what we already believe we’ve seen.

I want to go beyond that image, because I already know that it’s not as big a step as we think. And now this man lying on the ground reminds me of that thin line, at the same time as I am reminded just how high that wall between us is. Can I ever penetrate that cold that’s surrounding him? At this moment, as he pitifully cries out those words, it hurts, and it’s cold and brutal. Am I speculating about his pain from my safe position behind the camera? Am I capitalising on it, taking pictures of the tatters of his life without even understanding the extent of what he’s going through?

I know that I probably think too much for my own good. I developed a deep wrinkle in my brow by the time I was 16. My teacher even told me in so many words, “You think too much.” At 17 I stopped studying philosophy,

as I felt that no one—basically no one—had learned anything despite thousands of years of heavy thinking. My studies of philosophy came to an abrupt end when I read Denis Diderot’s story of Rameau’s Nephew¹, which once and for all proved to me that human empathy de facto has not developed at the same rate as technology.

Now several years later, the photographer and I unpack our camera and tripod; the ex-social worker who is now out in the cold himself explains what it is that torments the man lying on the ground. His wife threw herself on the railway tracks, committed suicide. He took to drink to ease the pain, ended up on the street, and now drinks even more to try to chase away the cold. A classic. The classic tale of life on the other side, that side which seems so far away from me.

¹ Original work by Denis Diderot: *Le Neveu de Rameau ou La Satire seconde*—an imaginary philosophical conversation, probably written between 1761 and 1772. Available in English translation from Penguin, 1966, London.

And let's be honest, who cares about this part of reality, this film I'm working with, anyway? It's the beginning of the 21st century, people rush past, averting their eyes from the increasing numbers of people inhabiting the streets and pavements. Who wants to see a film that takes place in the crumbling welfare society? I'm beyond tired, analysing my motives. But I find strength in this poem:

Non Serviam

*I am a stranger in this land
but this land is no stranger in me!*

*I am not at home in this land
but this land behaves as if it were at home in me!*

These are the first lines of Gunnar Ekelöf's poem *Non Serviam*², which is also carved at the foot of a sculpture by the same name on Malmkillnadsgatan in Stockholm's red light district, by artist Ernst Nordin. The sculpture

² Gunnar Ekelöf, "Non Serviam" from the collection *Non Serviam*, Bonniers, Stockholm 1945

portrays a young girl sitting on the ground, bending her head over Ekelöf's lines about human vulnerability in a harsh world. The sculpture only contains the first lines of the poem, but the last lines of it are what drive me in my work on this particular film:

*Once, in the short mild
the poor hours' wild Sweden
there was my land! It was everywhere!
Here, in the long, well-fed hours'
over-furnished Sweden
where everything is closed for draughts...
it is cold to me.*

GUNNAR EKELÖF

One late night I happened to see a prostitute jump up onto the foot of that statue after being hassled by a police patrol, and recite those lines aloud in a pompous, but serious voice. Naturally, I didn't have a camera with me at the time.

When I get home that night I go out on the balcony for a smoke. It is cold, and I watch the smoke snake away in the chilly air, across the echoing empty square below my balcony. There is frost on the ground. I sit with a blanket wrapped around my shoulders, my thoughts turning to the young man I know is sleeping on the stairs next to the chapel in Vasaparken, just 400 metres away. If I listen carefully, I can hear him breathing through the cold night air. No, not really, but I imagine I can. It's not that far. He was the one who told me that this could happen to anyone; it's just that people don't realise it. I wish I'd chosen another film, a more upbeat subject. I'm the reticent filmmaker, turning to the philosophy of knowledge as an afterthought to try to understand the journey I've made.

But I'm only doing that now, several years later; during the journey itself, I only have my intuition to go on. It leads me through the murky darkness of incomprehension. Philosopher Hans Larsson³ says that intuition

is a temporary peak in human thought, particularly in the ability to grasp and combine. I usually describe it as:

“good instincts usually tell you what to do before your head has figured it out.”

For a filmmaker, intuition is a vital tool. Without intuition guiding you through a multitude of situations, through meetings with all walks of life, you will simply fall flat. Reality isn't what it appears to be. Contexts are not always clear and visible. People don't always say what they really mean. And they don't always mean what they say. When you meet a person, you always sound them out first to get an idea of who they are. Sometimes you can be completely blank about them. Sometimes, even your own reflection in the mirror is blank. You stand there trying to make contact and nothing happens. With the

³ Hans Larsson, *Intuition, Några ord om diktning och vetenskap*, with a foreword by Ingela Josefsson Dialoger, 1997 Stockholm

camera as your tool, a filmmaker has power, but not always as much as you might think. Some people clam up, or offer themselves like a deck of cards and wait to see which ones you draw. Some give you the story you're looking for, the answers you're asking for. I'm well aware of all this.

My motivation as a filmmaker is to talk about the times we live in, to paint a picture of what it's like to be a human being, to reveal structures that are not immediately visible. I often work with issues related to creativity and vulnerability, and I've come into contact with existential issues, issues that put the filmmaker in the position of wondering, "What is this really about?" *Know Thyself* is a motto to live by.

As I see it, the process by which a filmmaker portrays a topic or a person is a bit like being caught up in an invasion from outer space. Absorbing, processing and analysing are all demanding processes that take time. New

questions crop up continuously, and usually you won't know the answer until you know it. It's like doing a jigsaw puzzle. It's not mechanical; it's an organic process. Time and patience are crucial aspects of a documentary filmmaker's life. So is the need to set boundaries, to draw a line between private and public, to immerse yourself in difficult ethical and moral questions.

Regarding visual storytelling, lighting and composition, I think it's important to get beyond appearances. I generally don't work with what I call spraypainting—aimlessly directing the camera any which way. Sometimes, of course, it's good to just go with the flow, but usually it pays to be meek. We tell the story with images. A documentary film is—to me—a journey of discovery, unscripted, not based on defined hypotheses of what I'm looking for. I ask questions, sometimes out loud, sometimes in my head. Usually I'm looking for *the person behind the myth*. Now and then, one or two of the

images may have come about coincidentally, but how you piece those pictures together, the perspective you impose, the tone you take, none of that is based on coincidence; those are conscious choices.

Hans Larsson writes about the synthesis of writing in a way that I love. As a documentary filmmaker, I was very happy to find these lines in his book. In fact they make a good summary of my perspective on the important considerations when portraying reality/ies:

Realism disregarded the synthesis inherent to good writing. It forgot that the act of presenting one thing after another, in simple succession, is something that many writers can accomplish. However, diligence is also needed. Realism forgot that human beings seek vantage points from which to observe life itself. The writer, some will say, must see more than 'a piece of reality'—he must supplement reality and grasp the thought behind it. And that is true. But he must also be able to isolate one particular

piece of reality. He has before him a fabric, in which the threads entwine one another in a great clustered mass; he must understand how to follow one thread with the eye, focusing on it to the exclusion of the others, and in so doing cast a light on a whole system of threads, making it visible as a whole. And he must highlight this system that he has isolated, lending it a sort of hue, to distinguish it from the rest. A singular effort and ability to construct a far-reaching synthesis are required if he is to succeed.⁴

But I'm not writing about a synthesis, nor even about a film; I'm searching for an insight that even now is hidden to me, as to why that incident outside the shelter made my cup run over. If I ask myself now, years later, what it was that really happened, will I find an answer? Won't I just find a melting pot of decayed memories, fruitless attempts to

⁴ Hans Larsson, p 25

create meaning out of a meaningless event that to a large degree shaped my continued career as a documentary filmmaker?

Perhaps the answer is simpler than it appears on the surface: *I should have seen it*. I should have seen what was about to happen. In his book *Etik och praktisk kunskap* [Ethics and practical knowledge] (Bergen 2011), Tore Nordenstam discusses philosopher Hjordis Nerheim, who points out the importance of *good judgement and situational understanding*.⁵

These two terms describe, to my mind, two qualities that characterise a particularly gifted documentary filmmaker. Taking a good, hard look at my own self-image, I failed miserably on both counts in the incident when the young man was abused by the older—and as I see it psychopathic—man who was doing his damndest to earn a

⁵ Hjordis Nerheim, *Den Etske grunnerfaring. Fra regelforståelse till fjortrolighetskunskap* (Oslo 1991).

place in the spotlight in front of my camera that morning.

I'm simply not good enough, because I didn't read the situation and I erred in judgement. I sat there on that bench with my back to the city and the faces of all the people that I'd charged myself with portraying. I'm not one whit better than all of the other "media people" who just briefly touch down in the environment to make their little reports, preferably for the extra-sentimental Christmas-season broadcasts.

I'm also angry, because I still remember the head of the City Mission saying in an interview that his work with helping the homeless was so heavy that he was forced to wash away his sorrows—several times a week—at a spa. He announced this in a TV interview as if it was the most natural thing in the world, while at the same time he was giving flats that were donated to the City Mission to his relatives (which was revealed

six months later). During the years I worked on the film,⁶ I developed a critical attitude towards charity as a for-profit industry. What is perhaps most difficult is not seeing—and hearing—all the bitter stories, but seeing the open disdain of the general public towards people who have slipped through the safety net.

Looking at some of the questions I asked in my initial story, what topics of discussion come up? My perspective, that there is no one truth, no one reality, is supported by the life-world theory of phenomenology (Heidegger, 1927–1992; Husserl, 1929–1992; Merleau-Ponty, 1945–2002). The core of life-world theory is a view of the world as complex and interwoven with many different characteristics. Husserl describes the life world as subjective and individual,

⁶ Tomorrow Never Knows, 2007, Camera32, released by Folkets Bio. Premiere at the Amsterdam International Film Festival. For a review, see nevanti.com/links and click on the following link: [A review in DOX, the leading European magazine on documentary filmmaking](#)

at once completely personal and linked to a social context. My question as to whether it is ever possible to portray another person's world is another story.

Of course I can give the easy answer: Sure. Sure, you can portray another person's world. It all depends on your level of ambition. It's always easier to depict external circumstances. This is how this family, tribe or subculture in this village or that city lives. This is what they think about the questions the filmmaker asks; this is what other people think about them. But my particular interest is to depict an individual's world on the theme "*Into the garden of your mind*".⁷ I try to put myself in another person's universe (or world, or reality). I try to understand it and interpret it as best I can. I might point out here that parallel realities is a concept I use when I talk about the individual experiences

⁷ Into the garden of your mind, Blue for Two, Freddie Wadling & Henryk Lipp, 1987

of a person's unique existence in relation to the world around him or her.

Wouldn't it be easiest to let that person paint a portrait of him- or herself? Or just set up a camera and document life as it happens? I don't think so. We don't always have the ability to see the things closest to us. Freddie Wadling, a unique figure in the Swedish music world, whom I portrayed in the documentary *Among the Elves*⁸, drew a sketch for me in my notebook, which he labelled: "From One UFO to Another".

He also commented that making the film was like "subjecting himself to psychoanalysis". It was hard, even for me as director. Asking the uncomfortable questions is taxing. Especially when the interviewee's wife lights into you at every break: "Kirsi, how dare you ask such contemptible questions? You're no better than the press!"

⁸ *Among the Elves* [En släkting till älvorna], 1999. Third Man Film. Directed by Kirsi Nevanti. Distribution Triangelfilm/ DVD Folkets Bio.

However, I had support from an unexpected source, when Wadling himself told his wife, "Bella, leave her be. She knows what she's doing." But there was an incident at the Atalante club in Gothenburg: We were standing outside while Freddie had a smoke and Bella lit into me, and I was so tired that I gradually dissolved into tears. The air was humming with energy—you could cut it with a knife. Yes, you can portray another person's world, but only to a certain degree. You can only get a quick glimpse of it, an inkling of their thinking, their awareness. The more time you spend at the surface, the more you as a filmmaker can claim to tell some kind of "truth"; but to me, those "simple truths" are not interesting.

As Einstein once said, "*Reality is merely an illusion, albeit a very persistent one.*"⁹.

⁹ *Einstein, Fakta/Citat*, Ikonbok, 2007, p 18

This, I believe, is one of the realities faced by filmmakers.

So what does all of this have to do with my initial question—was it the presence of the camera that led the attacker to brutalise his victim? There is no way of knowing if that man would have kicked the young man lying on the ground if I had not been there with my camera. Nor can I ever confirm my suspicion that he did so in order to be caught on film. The answer is that I don't know. I've never asked him, never seen him since then. He may as well be a ghost, or never have existed at all. But I know that he exists. He calls up all of the insecurities within me, crystallising all the negative aspects I see in my profession.

It has to do with the idea of being vulnerable. Vulnerable to human beings. That's both the positive and the negative side.

Let me give an example. A Swiss filmmaker named Richard Dindo put it like this:

“The best, easiest thing for a documentary filmmaker is to work with dead people. Preferably celebrities. That makes it easier to get funding (picture a film about, for example, Che Guevara), plus dead people never contradict you.” This was a discussion we had at the film festival in Locarno, in which we both had a film in Critic's Week. Only six documentaries were shown among hundreds of feature films.¹⁰ We were sitting on the terrace of a fancy hotel overlooking the Lago Maggiore as we talked. Looking back, I can agree with Dindo. The dead can intrude on your dreams, but they can't kick you (or anyone else) and they can't threaten the other people in the film you're working on.

And perhaps that's what this is all about, in the end. The responsibility one has as a filmmaker, and the constant scrutiny to which you subject yourself and your attitudes.

¹⁰ Complete list of films in Locarno 1999: http://www.hebdo.ch/festival_du_film_de_locarno_le_programme_7647.html

I'm talking about values and actions related to ethics, morals and compassion. That man, the attacker, tore some deep holes in the fabric that holds together my sense of morality, not to mention my self-image. I witness an event possibly triggered by my presence—and that of my camera—and I let myself be frightened into silence. Perhaps it was wise in the given situation, but it wasn't a very noble feeling. As Aristotle says, we strive for virtue. I had my reasons.

But a few years have passed and here he is now, the attacker, still wanting to make himself heard.

Wanting to be visible.

To be seen.

“In the future, everyone will be famous for 15 minutes.”¹¹ This famous statement by Andy Warhol is a hallmark of our time. I wonder if he knew how right he would turn

out to be? The French philosopher Jean Baudrillard (1929–2007) speaks of the “disappearance of reality”, using terms such as “seduction”, “obscenity”, “hyperreality” and “implosion”.¹² He states that the media creates something that becomes more real than reality.

Reality recedes. A beautiful and terrifying expression. Reality recedes. What a challenge for a documentary filmmaker, or any director at all.

I'm thinking of reality shows, newspaper articles, pseudo-celebrity, lip augmentation, Botox injections, breast implants, dating and getting married on television, buying a house, displaying one's genitals, exposing one's stupidity, voluntarily starving oneself in front of the camera. People seem to be willing

¹¹ From an exhibition catalogue for the Moderna Museet, 1968. Source: <http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/fifteen-minutes-of-fame.html>

¹² Svante Nordin, *Filosoferna. Det västerländska tänkandet sedan år 1900*, Atlantis, Stockholm 2011, p 566

to do just about anything to be seen in the white noise of the media, to obtain a brief moment of fame in an eternity that only lasts a second. Not to mention the importance of television series in many people's lives. A psychiatrist interviewed in Olivier Joyard's documentary on TV series as addictive baggage, says that he treats people whose lives have crumbled because a favourite TV series has gone off the air.

Which once again brings me back to that scene, the man kicking the defenceless young sleeper on the ground, surrounded by 20 or 30 witnesses, none of whom intervene. My intuition says he's trying to provoke me, to see if I will pull out my camera and start shooting. Or perhaps it's simply an impulsive act with no underlying meaning at all. Maybe he's bored, has nothing better to do. Maybe he needs psychiatric care. Maybe he's one of the mentally ill people who ended up on the streets after the psychiatric reform of the 1990s. Whatever the case, his behaviour is

morally reprehensible—you don't attack a man who's down, you don't attack anyone.

But he does, and he doesn't have to take any responsibility for his actions, because we're all afraid of him. Are we lacking in civil courage? Perhaps. But I have a goal—to complete the film I was sent to make. There and then, as the beating etches itself in my memory, I realise my limitations. I have now seen too much and I know that this part of my journey is over. The next station is to stop thinking and to complete the film.¹³

¹³ The film premiered in the Joris Ivens competition at the International Documentary Film Festival in Amsterdam in November 2006. The copy arrived in Amsterdam by courier from Filmteknik just a couple of hours before the premiere. It was green; the soundtrack had several flaws. The digital transfer technology that Filmteknik had recommended was still in its early days and this particular film went in as 35 mm and “came out as VHS”, to quote Tove Torbiörnsson, a filmmaker colleague and later documentary film consultant at SFI. At the Swedish premiere in February 2007, several unpleasant things happened. Among other things, a man urinated in the audience while loudly commenting on one of the film's main characters. The review in *Situation Stockholm* had already panned the film before the premiere.

SVT Kultur praised the film, in part for its criticism of the charity industry but SVT Drama never used its broadcast rights.

Since then, I never go out alone, and we never film anything apart from what is happening in our main characters' lives. I now realise that I will never be able to portray more than a tiny fraction of what happens, and I understand even less how we can simply rush past people in need when it's so cold and the wind is so icy. At the end of the day, it is every individual's responsibility to defend their actions and their morals. I can't change the world; I can't build a roof over the head of everyone who doesn't have one, but I can make a film that shows the part of reality that I have seen. I can give a voice to people who otherwise would not be heard. So be it.

In the searchlight

If I ask myself exactly what kind of good I hope to achieve¹⁴ in my field, the answer is simple. I look for those small moments of happiness that occur when people understand each other a little bit better after

seeing a film, reading a book, talking to one another, coming together in some kind of insight about art, about life. Perhaps even when someone looks another human being in the eyes and smiles. Even when life seems bleakest, there are still flashes of light, tenderness and humour. Through my experience, I am now aware that I can only make an interpretation of reality, and if someone understands himself or others a little bit better after seeing one of my films, that's good enough for me.

The grand old man of Swedish documentary film, Arne Sucksdorff, writes in his memoirs that "As an old Voltairean, I am convinced that the primary mission of mankind is to spread the light of enlightenment. Words are power, with all that entails. Take care with your words."¹⁵ And now that my words are

¹⁴ Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics, book 1* (The goal of striving—something good) Daidalos, 1988, Gothenburg

¹⁵ Sucksdorff, A. *En Drömmares väg, Memoarer av Arne Sucksdorff. [A dreamer's journey. Memoirs of Arne Sucksdorff]*. 1994. Stockholm: Streiffert

running out, I'd like to quote Niels Bohr, as the core of his philosophy speaks deeply to me about the human condition and the world we live in:

*There is no quantum world. There is only an abstract physical description. It is wrong to think that the task of physics is to find out how nature is. Physics concerns what we can say about nature... What is that we humans depend on? We depend on our words. Our task is to communicate experience and ideas to others. We are suspended in language.*¹⁶

Einstein, with whom Bohr discussed many things, is said to have commented on Bohr's and Heisenberg's thesis—that the values of physical reality cannot be stated with precision—with the words: “God doesn't play dice with the world.”¹⁷ To me, God is not a problem in the context, as long as we

¹⁶ Pais, p 24
¹⁷ Nordin, p 369

communicate experiences and ideas with one another. And that's something that documentary filmmakers do, in their own way.

At the beginning of the journey

In this paper I have tried to outline thoughts about the part of reality that I am familiar with, the mental landscape in which I as a filmmaker move. Writing is a particularly strenuous way of thinking, as Professor Ingela Josefson likes to say. I take the liberty of adding: “making films is a particularly strenuous way of thinking and formulating the countless mysteries of existence.” Regarding the importance of the camera to what happens, I don't have a clear answer, but I insist—with a bit of a smile—on once again turning to the world of quantum physics:

What Bohr was pointing to in that historical lecture was the strange realisation that in the quantum world, the only way the observer

(including his apparatus) could be uninvolved as if he observed nothing at all. In other words the object and the tools of observation form an inseparable whole.¹⁸

In the words of Schiller: “Only wholeness leads to clarity, and Truth lies in the abyss” (*Nur die Fülle führt zur Klarheit, Und im Abgrund wohnt die Wahrheit*).

¹⁸ Professor S.C Goswami, Department of Chemistry, University of Delhi, New Delhi, India, on the Complementarity principle: Meeting Ground of Science, Philosophy and Religion. For more information, see: http://www.here-now4u.de/eng/complementary_principle_meeti.htm

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2

Berlin's Times

A European Roadmovie

It's all gone a little too fast. Berlinski Times. But I'm still quite spoiled. Homemade fireworks from the homeless camp on the empty lot across the street. Even the boat slows down when the sky over Berlin goes wild with flashing lights.

The song isn't over yet. The stray dog is still barking. Life is certainly strange.

With Life as your stage manager.

Is this film fictional? Or did it really happen? I hear the question as I stand in a high-ceilinged room, surrounded by a large group of people who have just attended the gala premiere of Finnish Blood, Swedish Heart. The man who posed the question looks concerned, his face and stance demanding an answer. He is leaning towards the protagonist of the film, a relatively young middle-aged man who went through the emotional journey we just watched in the cinema.

From Finland to Sweden and back to Finland at his parents' whim; a whole lifetime spent

between these two moves—even if it was only the period between early childhood and a teenager’s holding pattern in the eternal wait for adulthood. Then an adult move back to Finland, later the birth of his own son, and a happy marriage, although he always wonders why he continuously has a hole in his heart.

He goes back to Gothenburg with his father to search for answers. And those answers flash on the screen in quick succession—or perhaps at the fastest rate possible when the rhythm is Finnish. Long periods of nothing but silence. A voice asking, “Dad, why, how come, why, what happened?”

The father, a genial but wonderfully awkward character, appears to be unable to provide a quick answer, but the answers come. Some of them astonishing. That’s how I recall it. But the man asking if it was fiction, what we just saw in the documentary on the silver screen, he still wonders. My guess is

that this is not his universe, what we see on the screen. It’s not a world he recognises—and so it feels like fiction. Too good to be true. But it isn’t; it’s a film that exudes its era, in another part of the world, yet just around the corner, somewhere you can’t always see. I like to say that when documentary film is at its very best, it’s like being brought into someone else’s world, into his or her universe:

In the best scenario, the film takes us to another dimension, to an existential context. The film articulates the inexplicable, tries to help us understand the world of another—a place, a phenomenon, an era. In the best scenario, it reflects the whole of existence for just an instant, like poetry. An interpretation of reality is what a documentary filmmaker works with.

“You are what you Art.”

Graffiti on the walls of Berlin. And an interpretation of the reality we live in. In short, precise brushstrokes. The words that interpret the world as we (or the person who wrote them) see it, images that interpret the world as we (or the person who drew them) see it. Is it fictional, is it documentary—where does the line go? Is important to draw that line, and why? Documentary film versus fiction, our dreams and nightmares; don't they all have the same core? Can't a fictional film be just as authentic as a documentary, if not even more? Can't a documentary be just as contrived as any other film?

In this essay, written in Berlin in April 2013, I want to discuss some important questions for documentary filmmakers regarding reality and authenticity, among other things. For the question of what is fictional and what is documentary comes up more and more often.

Bullet holes in time.

Outside, the dog has fallen silent. The fireworks have died out. But the memories remain. In Stockholm, in that high-ceilinged room, the question still hangs in the air: Is this fiction? Is it for real? The man who knows the answer regards the questioner. He doesn't answer right away. But not because of uncertainty.

Outside my window a voice cries out in the night. I just want to sleep.

And I wake up. To another image of reality. Outside the hotel window, the city and the TV tower in Berlin are bathed in a soft evening fog. The sun has just disappeared beyond the horizon. A few days have passed. What happened? Really? If I delve into my own memories—or, if you will, the digitised memories in my little Leica—they're only an interpretation of yesterday.

. . .

Behind the Screen.

Today I'm watching a film by Helma Sanders-Brahms. Gomorrah. The director—plagued by an illness that I've heard is wearing her down and sapping her strength—stands before the audience in auditorium 3 at the Babylon cinema. I don't understand a lot of German, but I see and hear how pleased she is. The actor is excellent. And this is a film that not many people have seen. Not far into the film, I think I can see why. There are light years between the Matrix from 1999 and this German science fiction film from the early 70s.

We walk out in the middle of the film. Sanders-Brahms has made so many films that are amazing, says my host. As soon as we get out on the street, one man in the group exclaims, "Oh, after that movie, life seems so unnaturally real!"

I change hotels. I can't relax. Soon I'll be changing scenery. For one reality to another.

And yet it's the same life, the same breaths, the same pulse. The same long coat, which is starting to smell of sweat. The sweaty researcher on the prowl. Probably no one will ever read this text. But I insist on writing it. Because I have no idea how to infuse it with the reality I am in, even as I am in it.

Berlin, Alexanderplatz, a late evening in April 2013.

Of pure coincidence I run across a bookshop. One of the books that finds its way into my hands is the *Jean Baudrillard Reader*. The second book looks like it may be relevant to my search for reality/ies: *Why Hasn't Everything Already Disappeared?* Author: Jean Baudrillard. In "Impossible Exchange" from 1999, he argues that:

"The World has no equivalence, no double, no mirror, and without such a presentation, its nature cannot be verified—there is, indeed, no 'reality'."

Baudrillard's writings were what inspired the Matrix trilogy. The French philosopher states that reality is receding, that the media create a hyper reality, which takes precedence over the real thing. "The Real have been spirited away..." he writes; soon reality will only exist as a theme park. I look at the monkey in the Berlin Zoo, as it lies there contemplating its fate.

Is this where reality belongs? In a zoo? In a theme park?

And now I can hear the sea.

The next morning. I walk along pulling my suitcase behind me, feeling like a lone cowboy moseying down the abandoned main street of the abandoned city. An elderly man sitting on a low wall beside one of the small gardens along the street observes me with curious eyes. My coat is long; it's hot and I keep walking. Smiling in recognition, I walk past Plato. The café I stop at is called Cake Box.

Now I'm somewhere where I can think.

Thinking is an underrated activity, I said a few weeks ago to my daughter, after she asked me, "What are you doing, you seem to be just sitting there, quietly, for such a long time?" "I'm thinking. I'm trying to think," I corrected myself. "I'm expanding my horizons, my range of experience." That is also the answer I also offer to anyone who wonders what a documentary filmmaker does. Whether you're watching or making a film, you're expanding your horizons, your range of experience.

La Condition Humaine. In the words of Hannah Arendt in *Vita activa*: "The world's reality thus imposes itself on human existence like a commanding force, and is perceived as such." What does she really mean? Does the world have *one* reality? I think about the current worldview—with the critical words of philosopher Thomas Nagel—the materialistic, neo-Darwinist approach

that does explain the creation of the universe, but cannot explain the subjective perception of consciousness. This means that this worldview is probably incorrect, says Nagel.

I close the article I had saved in the *Svenska Dagbladet*. It seemed much more revolutionary when I read it in January 2013. Now, in April the same year, it's so much flatter, as if I have already grown accustomed to the idea.

I search for the words that don't want to come, laughing maliciously in their hiding places. My thoughts go back to that evening in Stockholm, about a week ago. Finnish Blood, Swedish Heart. The film is a road movie that flits easily between memories and the present, in the ambiguous moments of insecurity that arise when people try to understand, communicate their lives and experiences. In this case, father and son, but also Finland and Sweden, cultures that are so close and yet so far apart.

Inner and outer realities.

It does make sense, all of it. To me. The comic elements in this film as well. Like when the father finally—and completely incidentally—mentions the reason for the family's moves. Such tiny things that become so important. Sometimes reality seems wilder than fiction. With Life as your stage manager, anything can happen. A documentary filmmaker interprets reality; film is about our dreams (and our nightmares). The question that the man in the audience asked the protagonist is in many ways typical of the era we live in.

Is this real? Or fictional?

This is a discussion that the Swedish media are heatedly debating. Though I must add, it's not a new discussion. Countless films are analysed in one way or another by representatives of the self-appointed reality check agency. The Oscar-winning *Searching for Sugarman* is just one example of a film

whose “truth” is endlessly debated. It’s a discussion that is completely incomprehensible to a documentary filmmaker, as “truth” is often mixed up with “objectivity”—itself an impossibility. An excellent summary is found under the heading “Diskutabel Dokudrama #2” (Debatable Docu-drama #2) by film critic and PhD Hynek Pallas, who writes:

Once I was sitting there in front of the film, all set to present actual facts about Rodriguez in my coming review, I was struck by the thought—perhaps because I already knew so much—of how much better and more skilful this story was than a story about What Actually Happened to Rodriguez.

Pallas continues:

Because the point of Searching for Sugarman is that it’s not primarily about Sixto Rodriguez; it’s just as much about South Africa during the Apartheid era. That

it’s not about Bendjelloul’s search for and relationship to Rodriguez, but about two South Africans’ (who probably had no idea of his success and tours in Australia, because that would have made the film untruthful) search for and obsession with his music. And the storytelling and structure of the film are also about this.

He summarises:

At any rate, documentary film is not something that presents all the facts... And if this were the case, that it gave all the facts, the entire history of documentary film—from Robert J. Flaherty’s staging and manipulative pictures of events and the role of native peoples in them, through the Maysles brothers’ Grey Gardens, D. A. Pennebaker’s Don’t Look Back and many, many more of the true greats—would be about as much fun to watch as those DVDs of fireplaces.

Or, more briefly, from the perspective of a documentary filmmaker: Documentary film is an interpretation of reality. A cinematic work, snippets of time. What I find interesting is where *our era's hard-on for reality* comes from; what is the background to this utopian search for an objective truth? Anyone who reads daily newspapers or follows various blogs may feel well versed in the perceptions of our time and knows the answer that I've heard time and time again parroted like some sort of mantra and ultimate proof of illumination:

We live in such manipulative times; for once, we want something authentic, true, real!

As I see it, reality is like the blind man's white cane in a universe of labyrinths where we regularly—and gladly—get lost. Which makes me think of a Master Class with the Rembrandt of documentary film, as he is introduced at the festival, the Russian director Viktor Kossakovsky, who has made

many fantastic, quirky films. In autumn 2012 he was at the international documentary film Festival in Amsterdam, one of the biggest in the world. It was showing a retrospective of his works, along with a series of films that he chose himself: The Kossakovsky Top 10.

The director introduces all of his own films along with those he selected. At one point he says something that I find very memorable:

If you know what you want to “tell”—do something else. It is the biggest lie in film history that films tell stories. Film is all about “Visual Art”. I am just happy if I see something which I didn't predict. If you can't use your eyes, why are you doing films? If you just want to teach, get out of the cinema, go to a classroom!

The Canadian producer Peter Wintonick, who is hosting the festival this year along with festival general Ally Derks, is asked by Kossakovsky to stand up in his chair.

“Please, Peter, tell me, what did you experience this morning?” Peter sways precariously on the chair, his face not able to mask the surprise. His answer is far more explicit than it would have been if he had remained calmly seated.

. . .

A man appears to walk out into the ocean.

He disappears for a while behind the palm tree. When he reappears, I realise that there are actually two people walking there on the beach, just 50 or so metres in front of my building. I see them through the big, wide-open window that lets the world into my room, up close to my desk, and which also separates me from that same world. The floor is cold under my feet and the water shifts in various shades of blue, resting there in the bosom of the sea. Occasionally my words hit home, like fishing lures thrown in the sea to bring in a catch.

And it's been a long time since I had lunch; at least as I recall. It was in Berlin.

This theme is also touched on by José Van Dijck, in the book *Mediated Memories in the Digital Age*. New media and technologies affect the time we live in and how we remember our history. Processed images in themselves become more real than the reality they are meant to portray; the relationship between private and public becomes changing and diffuse, with the result that it affects memories and experiences, people's image of themselves and others. Reality is not, does not turn out, as we remember it, but as we choose to remember. Although, on the other hand, isn't that a human quality from the beginning of time, with or without digital media? The difference is only that we can now choose to share with others our personal view of reality in a more immediate way, through digitised pictures that become our private and public memories. Easy to

upload and easy to share with the whole world. Just a key press or two away.

Or, to quote a whimsical parody song that just popped into my head:

Memory, it's completely diminished. Am I Swedish or Finnish?...

In this constant flood of images, tailored memories and created identities in a mishmash of parallel realities, documentary films are expected to document Life As It Is? Authenticity?

Authenticity.

To me as a documentary filmmaker, or a human being in general, authenticity is paramount. But with some nuance: Authenticity, not as in truth, but as in genuine in spirit. I like to say that the difference between documentary film and fiction is not great, if it exists at

all. Both work with images as the primary form of expression. The difference is the method and the surrounding circumstances—including the fact that you have a lot less money when working on a documentary.

It is time and trust that cost money when it comes to documentary film. It's much easier to stand at the end of the road knowing all of the answers in retrospect, than to stand at the beginning of the road, wanting to see the events, the lives and destinies. You don't have to be a philosopher to understand that life is lived forwards, but understood backwards.

After the premiere of one of my films, I used to describe the female protagonist as “*our* Julia Roberts”. In particular I remember a radio reporter who looked somewhat insulted at that description; the star quality of documentary films is not as self-evident as all that. It brought a smile to my lips when I read, a decade later, in Hynek Pallas's work, a quote of Stefan Jarl's playful definition of what a

documentary film is: “Julia Roberts isn’t in it”. (Cyril Hellman, Orosdi-Back 2010).

I will allow Stefan Jarl to continue developing that thought:

A feature film uses a script, actors, staging and so on. A documentary filmmaker uses authentic moments as building blocks.

That’s Stefan Jarl.

And it’s true. A documentary film is a portrayal of the world as the person behind the camera interprets it, with more or less agreement from the rest of the world—or the people—in front of the camera. The director has a prominent role. With Life as your stage manager, however, a director needs to have a well-developed ability to intuitively sense what is genuine and what is illusion; to ride a mental roller coaster.

Or perhaps a hideous, emotionally demanding merry-go-round. I have occasionally said, Never again will I do a documentary, because of the vulnerability of a documentary film director. Vulnerability to the people, to the myriad of conditions and thought patterns and ethical and moral question marks that I described in the essay One Overcast Morning (2012). In that essay, I describe the importance of situational understanding and the responsibility you have as a documentary filmmaker when working with material based on other people’s lives and experiences, memories and sensations. All true, but at the same time, having said that, I would also like to point out the difficulty of capturing reality, or images of reality if you will. In the words of Baudrillard:

Behind every image, something has disappeared. And that is the source of its fascination. Behind virtual reality in all its forms (telematics, IT, digitization, etc.) the real has disappeared. And that is what

fascinates everyone. According to the official version, we worship the real and the reality principle, but—and this is the source of all the current suspense—is it, in fact, the real we worship, or its disappearance?

It's a titillating text—*Why Hasn't Everything Already Disappeared?*—which Jean Baudrillard wrote just before his death in 2007 on the theme of “ranging from the potential disappearance of humanity as a result of the fulfilment of its project of world mastery to the vanishing of reality through the transmutation of the real into the virtual”.

Somewhere in there, the *desire for reality* comes in. Without a doubt, I believe that we are living in a gigantic paradigm shift; unreality has become the new reality. We don't need LSD or other drugs to flip out in the universe—our trip is just a few key presses away. What was once the gladiators battling it out in the Coliseum now occurs virtually today.

My daughter can sit for days simulating a reality consisting of a social experiment: can two completely egocentric people take care of a child, or will they forget it, so that the creator—the player—must eventually choose to let the child die? A child can kill and live out its fantasies; a child can create virtual worlds and continuously adopt new roles, Avatars and Nicks completely interchangeably. Someone who falls in love with another person in the virtual world doesn't have to defend their actions IRL.

In Real Life.

“Aha, are the new people gamers?” my daughter asks when my friend is moving out of her apartment. She just heard that they prefer a flat with dark rooms. This is the Södermalm district of Stockholm in November 2012. I happened to see the flat that this family had decorated; even the six-year-old had her own TV right next to her parents' two big screens (so they could all

play their own games) in the living room. Welcome to the future; it's already here. In Real Life.

. . .

Photos. The palm tree outside my window. The plane that just flew by. A wall of sound that briefly sweeps over me. I remember a friend who no longer wants to travel. He prefers to stay in his house in the country, taking in the world through his thoughts, his words. And that reminds me of the film *Children of Men*. Nothing surprises me anymore. I think of all the documentary films I saw in Amsterdam at the film festival in autumn 2012. So many of them already feel familiar. Didn't I see that film a few years ago? No, but they had presented a pitch in some forum a few years ago, which is why the contents already seem familiar. Most everything seems so neatly packaged, so well adapted.

Perhaps the most common question I hear from students in the cutting room is, "Will they understand what's happening, will they understand what we mean?" Time and time again I protest against this mantra of understandability, which seems to have sprung from all the pitch workshops where filmmakers are expected to learn how to present their concept so that "everyone understands".

Right there, you're already getting away from reality, because reality isn't so well packaged. It wriggles like a school of fish in a net. It is both virtual and real; it comes in thousands of specimens. It doesn't want to adapt to "what the audience wants". A future scenario: All the men and women who are commissioning editors at various TV channels will soon be mummified, unrecognisable, wrapped up in their requests of what the audience wants.

The film that makes the greatest impression

on me in Amsterdam is a relatively old one. Old in the sense that film tends to be viewed as just any utility item on the global market. *Tishe!* by Victor Kossakovsky is a marvellous film from 1992 about what happens on a street corner in St Petersburg. The camera is positioned in a window; the director is behind the camera, and life is going on in front of it. It's so beautiful that I have tears in my eyes halfway through it.

What faith in the visual! In *Life* as a stage manager. In the passage of time.

It is perhaps the most documentary film I've seen in a long time. And absolutely nothing exciting happens in it. Just life passing by on a street corner. A crack in the tarmac that appears and is repaired, over and over. Road workers coming and going. Young lovers who have arranged to meet there. A dog coming out of a building. An old woman coming out to look for the dog. Nothing unusual. A masterpiece.

How poetic simplicity can be. All of existence in one instant.

But not for someone who demands a clear story to be told in every scene, in every film, instead of the story—or the universe, or if you will, the reality—that is born when a human watches a film and counters its interpretation with her own ability to observe the world and draw conclusions.

Director Viktor Kossakovsky himself says, “I am just happy if I see something which I didn't predict. What did you see?”

What do you see?

Hannah Arendt writes about the banality of evil. In our society, I believe that banal evil can be attributed to the media noise that surrounds us all the time, creating a sort of hyper reality, as Jean Baudrillard says. When nothing is real anymore and nothing surprises us anymore, then how can we see

the nuances in our existence? When people are excluded, when otherness becomes inaccessible due to all the time we spend being connected? Really, when I think about it, isn't it strange that *thinking* itself is the primary sacrifice in an era that is so performance oriented? What are you doing? Thinking. Quite an uncommon reply.

Finnish Blood, Swedish Heart is an ostensibly simple film. A road trip, a father and son talking, some musicians on the side of the road singing immigrant songs. No exciting car chases, no intense lovers' trysts, no journey into space. No life-changing decisions for the camera to register. Just a journey into the inner landscape of a man whose life was affected by his parents' decision to change countries. So simple. Is it fiction? Did you make it up? There is something typically contemporary about that question. When it seems that anything can be simulated, made up, built up in a virtual reality—is this human fate true? Did it really happen?

Or is it manipulated?

Manipulation.

In the past year, the film *Call Girl* upset many people and generated a lot of discussion. It is based on real events in Sweden in the 1970s. The cardinal error of that fictional film is that it claims that the Prime Minister of Sweden at the time, Olof Palme—not specifically named in the film, but fully recognisable in the way he talks and dresses as well as the staging and the era—paid a teenager for sex.

At the same time, one of the year's (2012) most popular documentaries was about Olof Palme and his hero status as pretty much a lone intellectual in Swedish politics. I was a young adult when Palme was murdered; I was there on the scene early that morning in my role as a radio reporter. I don't know all the details of what Olof Palme did or didn't do, but I find it morally and ethically

unacceptable that such a serious act—although not a criminal act at the time—is attributed to a murdered man who cannot defend himself against the accusation. My eyes prickle when I see his sons, especially one of them, getting interviewed about his father, the politician, and I understand what it must be like to go around hearing the accusations that *Call Girl* brought about. Granddad? What did Granddad do, daddy?

Our images can rewrite history. If it exists digitally, does that make it true? If a fictional film borrows from reality, the same ethical rules apply as in documentary film. Do not make any claims that are not genuine in spirit. Naturally, this makes a lot of demands on ethics and morals.

It's no surprise to me that the film is going to be recut, finally. They want to attract an audience, the ones who chose not to see the film at the cinema because of the accusations. People get angry, and many, including

me, choose not to see the film. I live with images in my head; I want to protect myself and my awareness as much as possible. Respect/self-respect, says philosopher Tore Nordenstam, is underrepresented as a theme in the European philosophical tradition; but morals exist in everyday situations. I just want to protect myself from the unpredictability of mental aggression.

As a documentary filmmaker, I am also particular about the genuineness of spirit that a film brings out, even if it is not necessarily “bare truth”, but is interpreted in images through the imagination and intellectual capacity of the human being. Viktor Kossakovsky, or perhaps it was someone in the audience in his Master's Class in Amsterdam that autumn of 2012, described the portrayal of reality in documentary film with this clever mental image:

Reality makes love to the imagination.

That's right up there with Baudrillard's receding reality. But now it strikes me: Since reality in the sense of what is authentic, genuine, reliable, primeval, actual, truthful, perhaps is being set aside—if not now, then in the near future—then isn't it possible that documentary film is also on the verge of a paradigm shift? Or at least an adaptation.

From portraying our lives and what it is like to live as a human being, with all the cinematic means available, to simply generating pleasant fluff to entertain people? Honestly, we're already there. What films—or programmes—reach out to the masses? Enjoyable, audience-friendly films with Happy Endings. Adapted to death, kept alive on Viagra to keep the spiritual erection up in the name of general mediocrity, when there is no excitement to be had. Very many things that are called “documentary” are nothing but shallow sensationalistic news reports and/or reality shows.

A cheap way of making TV. Under the guise of documentary film.

Exhausted, sick to death of all the talk about “esoteric films that audiences don't want to see” according to programmers, but that absolutely deserve air time. For example, *Last Train Home* by Chinese filmmaker Lixin Fan. It won awards in festivals worldwide; a fantastically strong film, a family drama and an epic depiction of the personal cost of the Chinese economic miracle to 100 million people, depicted by a lone filmmaker who eventually found a Canadian co-producer to make the film accessible to the rest of the world.

Bullet holes in time.

In *The Human Condition*, or *Vita Activa*, Hanna Arendt writes: “the difference between a story that really happened and a fictional one is that the latter was first thought out and then written, while the first occurred without

craft or manufacture. The true story that life is captive in and that we cannot escape as long as we live, does not relate to a visible or invisible author because it is not authored in any way.” (pp.253–254).

The true story that life is captive in—isn't that the challenge of every documentary filmmaker?

But that is precisely the difference today. We want to—and to some degree can—write the story of our own lives! We can do it on Facebook, for example, that digital diary with a global reach. We can film every moment of our lives with our mobile phones. Shoot, select, reject, redo. Instagram.

Jean Baudrillard writes about Jean-Claude Romand, the man who described himself as a doctor and who invented a parallel life as one, a complete fiction. Eventually he killed his entire family, just so that they wouldn't have to be disappointed that he'd made it

all up. Crime of Passion. He loved his family, is Baudrillard's interpretation, and didn't want them to have to live with the shame when his deception was revealed.

Suddenly I feel the need for an art museum. I want to see life neatly framed and carefully rationalised in the accompanying texts. I am momentarily tired of life; it can be such a miserable beast, swallowing up everything that comes in its path. But because I'm not an embittered personality by Aristotle's measure, I don't bear a grudge against life for very long; it passes while I listen to Arvo Pärt's *Spiegel Im Spiegel*.

What is art? I brought Ernst Billgren's book no. 2 on this theme with me on the trip. Shouldn't art reflect our times? The short answer in Billgren's book is: "Good grief!" The long answer (at this point I already want to kill myself) is:

I had a friend who was out of town for a week; when he got home and tried to get back in the swing of things by reading the headlines, the world was completely incomprehensible. They were about a duck named Anna who had shocked all of Sweden. He was completely baffled; he thought Disney had gone mad. The modern era has a way of changing meaning in a very short time. As soon as you try to reflect our time, it's too late and the image you get is delayed and reversed, as in a mirror. [Note: The misunderstanding above refers to Anna Anka, the ex-wife of singer Paul Anka, where anka is the Swedish word for duck.]

Thinking, or analysing in depth, doesn't seem to be worth much today. Billgren's *What is Art II—100 New, Very Important Questions* is on sale in Berlin, in English translation. I stand looking at the little black book on the counter, near the cash register, in a bookshop that doesn't have a single English translation of Hannah Arendt's books. They're all in

German. I am excluded. We're captives of our language, says Niels Bohr. I deliberately move away from Bohr, who is always in my thoughts, to Baudrillard, who I think offers the most interesting analysis of the most important issues of today.

Much of what he writes is also among the most beautiful things I've read in a long time.

Somewhere in Colorado there is a demarcation line where the waters part—the so called Continental Divide—some running off to the Atlantic, the rest to the Pacific. It is a line almost as imaginary as the one separating the past from the future—that line we call the present. And the two dimensions of time themselves run off and vanish into oceanic depths of their own. The instant, the dividing line is a line of destiny: past and future part here, never to meet again.

Past and future part here, never to meet again.

The sea outside my window is covered with whitecaps chasing one another in the reality that is also mine.

When I think of photographs from the 19th century, those images are true for the moment when they were taken. Those people standing in front of the camera still exist to me today. If I look at a picture taken today, with digital technology, I (don't) know with certainty the picture is manipulated. If the female ideal of our era, Barbie, really existed, apparently she could only have half a liver. There's not enough space for any more. All those images are so manipulated that the most active players in our hyper reality, celebrities, probably don't look at all like they do in the pictures. Real life is more unembellished, has broader thighs and a bigger bum.

In *Why Hasn't Everything Already Disappeared?*, Jean Baudrillard writes:

This is not merely an episode in the history of technology: with this turn to the digital, the whole of analogue photography, the image in its entirety—conceived as the convergence of the light from the object with the light from the gaze—is sacrificed, is doomed forever.

It is the world and our vision of the world that is changed by this.

But it's not just about analogue versus digital pictures; the scope is much wider. He writes:

Once again, this is all just one tiny example of what is happening on a massive scale in all fields. Particularly in the fields of thought, concepts, language and representation. The same destiny of digitization looms over the world of the mind and the whole range of thought (s.39–40).

Perhaps that's a bit dark; maybe the scenario is exaggerated, but Baudrillard is talking about those who have time to immerse themselves

in ones and zeros. The consumers of media noise. The naprapath on Sveavägen says that “iPad Neck” has become a concept in the industry; all these people standing around with their chins and lowered to their chests, staring at their mobile phones and screens with their endless content; Baudrillard’s vision of the future doesn’t seem all that improbable.

Getting back to the word *real*. The man who asked that question in Stockholm—is the film real, genuine, did it really happen—deserves an answer. The protagonist looks at him and says thoughtfully:

“Of course it’s documentary; would we be here now if it wasn’t my life?”

My life, your life, our parallel realities. Images we create, that we choose to remember on some plane; and on another plane the much bigger questions in the universe that we don’t fully master, don’t know much about.

To a documentary filmmaker, reality is relatively simple, in the everyday; what happens outside the camera—what unfolds, what is said, what isn’t said, what is interpreted. All this must be sorted, filtered and organised into a certain space of time, the length of the film. Different documentary filmmakers do it differently, with different temperaments and different levels of skill depending on who is watching and assessing the results. But we all have one thing in common:

Documentary film is born out of the love of portraying an era, the movements and thoughts of people in their own tiny universes. If it could stay that way, if documentary film could escape having to adapt to the banalising frameworks of the entertainment industry, if it could maintain its freedom to portray the world in a tender union between the real and imaginary, that would be fantastic. That way at least documentary film could be an

accompaniment to reality, on public display, in a theme park, in a conceivable time when we no longer know what is really real.

That makes me think of John Lennon:

Reality leaves a lot to the Imagination.

In this essay I have tried to organise my thoughts about some of the core concepts of documentary filmmaking as I see it: reality, inner or outer (as we portray it), with Life as the stage manager. I don't consider myself philosophically gifted, at least not much more than the plane that just flew over my head can say anything about the air surrounding it.

The only thing I know for sure is that the world is wonderfully beautiful, invaluable and intangible, and that's what creates the fascination of portraying it. I look at my shadow and know that everything that comes after this will likely be an attempt to

go beyond my own shadow.

. . .

Hannah Arendt writes that “the excitement with which we look forward to the end of a story helps us to focus unbiased on the future, even if we know very well that the only true certainty is death. That we living creatures can even stand to go on existing with death ahead of us, that we are not in any way just waiting for the execution of the death sentence we received on being born, may be related to the fact that we are all captives in an exciting story with an unknown ending.”

Unknown ending.

In conclusion, I would like to reflect on artistic research. As a PhD candidate at one of Sweden's biggest universities of the arts, I have a privileged position. I am one of the first people in documentary film to be given the opportunity to get a doctorate in my

profession. Step one: finding words for my professional expertise.

Naturally, I can't claim to speak for all of us. The knowledge in my field is in no way absolute. There are as many ways of making a film as there are filmmakers. But I am speaking from my own experience, from the vantage point—using the Lund philosopher Hans Larsson's expression—where I am at the moment, in the fabric of life, the here and now.

What can artistic research into documentary film possibly arrive at? Making a film is a research journey all its own. The very doing of it is artistic research. But where film can remain subjective in its expression, and its communication, artistic research must be made available in the form of knowledge that can benefit others. To the degree that it is free, artistic research is a tool for delving into thoughts and concepts. It also gives the filmmaker(s) an opportunity to formulate

their own view of documentary film and its role and place in society.

We have lots of people who have opinions, like Kossakovsky's experiment with the questioner who had to stand on the chair and then describe what's really going on. I think it sharpens the focus when you are in a precarious situation yourself, rather than sitting comfortably in an armchair observing life, reality, documentary film.

Perhaps it can be put this way: Artistic research in documentary film can be seen as a vantage point in which the documentary filmmaker's practical professional work is the filter through which you see reality. We can adjust the focus on—and discuss—the issues that we personally consider important, actual. In my own case, in *One Overcast Morning* (2012) ethics, and now in *Berlinski Times* (2013)—reflections based on what I see as the core of documentary film—reality and authenticity.

Friday morning.

I'm in a taxi on the way to Tegel Airport. I'm starting to wonder if we're going to make it. The driver comments on my question: "What can I do? It is not far, but you see the traffic." My flight is leaving soon, with or without me, but I don't feel nervous sitting there in the taxi in Berlin on the way to the airport. I wouldn't be here now if it wasn't my life.

A short epilogue.

When I get home from Berlin, just a few days later, I visit the Fotografiska Museum, where one of the great photographers of our day is being honoured with an extensive retrospective: The Man, the Image & the World. Henri Cartier-Bresson, one of my very favourites alongside Lee (Elisabeth) Miller, worked with the camera as his sketchbook. He took pictures with his Leica to "give meaning" to the world:

I believe that, through the act of living, the discovery of oneself is made concurrently with the discovery of the world around us, which can mold us, but which can also be affected by us. A balance must be established between these two worlds—the one inside us and the one outside us. As the result of a constant reciprocal process, both these worlds come to form a single one. And in this world we must communicate.

In this world we must communicate.

I'm holding Cartier-Bresson's book *The Mind's Eye—Writings on Photography and Photographers* in my hands, reading and smiling. Artist that he is, even in his words he reflects over the essence of his expression and works. Lucky for me and the rest of the world—otherwise how would I get at his thoughts?

I call to mind a brief news item in the newspaper last year, about the suicide

of a fictional person that led to a massive outpouring of grief in Finland. This journey can be a long one. Just as in the film *Finnish Blood*, *Swedish Heart*, the best journeys don't end when the credits roll by. They live on in your thoughts. Nobel prize-winning physicist Niels Bohr—him again—said something that means a lot to me, and even applies in my world regarding the portrayal of reality in documentary film:

But my dear sir, in telling a true story one must not let oneself be too greatly influenced by the incidental reality.

In that same time, in an era where most everything can be created virtually, in a time when “true stories” are a rarity in the world of the banal (or in Baudrillard's words in one of his final writings, *Telemorphosis*: “the spectacle of banality, which today has become the real pornography, the real obscenity—of nothingness, insignificance, and flatness”), for that very reason, documentary

film needs to dig deeper than deep, not settling for just scratching the surface, not settling for doing a fly-by.

Documentary filmmakers should ask themselves the question: “What is this really about?” For reality slips away, it shifts, depending on who defines what is true, truthful, real, authentic, genuine. And that's why it is the documentary filmmaker's lot to stand strong and dig deep with our eyes, our camera, our hearing. What is interesting is not what appears to be, but what is beyond what appears to be. Gaining new access to reality.

And now I close my eyes, switching off my vision. Resting, to gain new strength to see.

Stockholm, May 2013

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3

A Shift Between Worlds



...to be continued.

A Photographic Essay taken on the occasion of the Man For A Day workshop under the leadership of Diane Torr at the Stockholm Academy of Dramatic Arts in March 2013. Photographer Johan Bergmark. A Project by Kirsi Nevanti.

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printed on Conqueror Connoisseur 100% Cotton, Soft White.
Both are archival quality and acid-free.

Kirsi Nevanti is a filmmaker with several shorts and creative documentaries under her belt, and a characteristic personal style. In her work as a director, Nevanti has learned that “good instincts usually tell you what to do before your head has figured it out.” She also says, “Making documentaries is interpreting reality, not necessarily as it appears to be; the key is that the film must be ‘true to the spirit’ of what is portrayed.”

These essays are the first part of the thesis work on creative processes and parallel realities in documentary film that Kirsi Nevanti is carrying out at Stockholm Academy of Dramatic Arts (SADA).