

«I want the audience to wonder about my protagonists»

Mia Halme discusses her film FOREVER YOURS with Marille Hahne and Christian Iseli



Christian Thank you very much for your insights about your working methods. It was very enriching and we learned a lot. In this interview there are two topics we would like to cover: the cinematography and montage or dramatic structure. Lets start with cinematography.

You described many methods about how you work during your shoots. For example, after the scene, where Inka is writing the letter to her father and her mother has read the letter, she approaches the stairs and puts the letter down on the handle bar. At this moment, the camera is right there to capture this action of dropping the letter beautifully – just like in a fiction film! This shot seems to be directed, but before this action the camera was observational, like in “direct cinema”. It’s an interesting mix of directing styles, on the one hand observing, on the other hand staged. Did you actually ask Inka to wait until your cameraman was readily positioned in order to capture her approaching the stairs?

Mia No, I didn’t. Only the beginning of the scene was planned. The mother had told me that Inka wanted to write a letter to her father. At this point I asked the mother and Inka, that we would like to be there with the camera for Inka to write this letter. We arranged a date and then I just said to Inka: Let’s start, go ahead and write the letter and she did. I didn’t direct her, how to write the letter or how to proceed. But because I had been with her family for so many times, I knew that they had certain habits about how they do these things. For example, I knew that the foster mother always read and discussed the letter right after Inka finished these attempts to communicate with her father. And they also read the letters that the father had sent to Inka, always together. Inka wants it this way, as it makes her safer to be near her foster mother when she has to deal with letters from or to her father. So I knew that after she would be finished writing she was

going to go down stairs to show and discuss her result to her foster mother. But I didn't know where the mother would be in this moment. So we just followed the actions as well as we could, there is no directing in this approach! There was also no directing when Inka puts down the letter on the staircase. All letters that are ready to go out of the house were always put there, so the camera knew where to be.

Marille Can we talk about the over shoulder shot when Inka is writing this letter? We see her writing the sentence, "I want to change my name". This sentence tells us about the content of the letter. Is this scene re-enacted? I ask this question because we see this moment from two angles as if it was planned and shot twice from two different perspectives?

Mia No, it is not directed and we just changed the angles of the camera while Inka was writing.

Marille What is very specific in your film is that we can watch the children when they are alone with not interaction with some other persons. I think this is a much harder observation for a film team because when your protagonist is engaged with someone else, they often forget the camera. But for example in the scene of Miko being alone with himself in the laundry room when he kicks the door of the washing machine in frustration, or the scene where he comes back from the school late and kicks the fence on his way home, he expresses real aggression towards objects. How can you and your cinematographer be that close?

Mia Well actually before the washing machine scene there had been a conflict, but the mother just went off. The scene continued that way and we kept shooting.

Marille So it was an aftermath?

Mia Yes that's why I talked about tired people, with long days and long scenes. Normally, I would have ended the filming, when the mother leaves. But I wanted to go on, because I thought that the treasure might be there, after the conflict took place. In the other scene, when he comes from school and kicks the fence, Miko knows that I accept how he reacts. So he's not afraid of me. He doesn't have to think about what I'm thinking now about him. That's why I chose this cinematographer, because he's really sensitive and smooth.

Marille Is there ever a scene where you hold the camera yourself or is that forbidden?

Mia No, in "Big Boy" I shot the camera myself, but "Forever Yours" was shot with the RED and I didn't use the RED myself. We were always a team. Sometimes I shot with another cinematographer. What was really interesting is, that because this second cinematographer had a different personality, working with him influenced the scenes differently. In comparison, he was not such a social person, he mostly talked with the kids but less with the adults. For example, he shot the ending scene with the biological mother. I felt that the people could be more negative in his presence. Scenes developed differently depending on the cinematographer.

Christian So the casting of the crew is very important.

Mia Yes, really important, and also that you can change the cinematographer from one person to another in the same film shoot

Christian Ok I think we should talk about our second topic, the montage or dramatic structure. You said that you were thinking about having a different ending, like a happy ending. And you were talking about the conflicts in your protagonists' lives and how these conflicts developed. However, when we look at your film beginning, for a long time nothing seems to happen. The audience has to wait, until they can identify a main character. Once I could hook on to the two main stories, I was inside your film. – Why is Inka introduced only after twelve minutes into the film and not earlier, can you talk about this tactic?

Mia Of course, this was a decision... once – after some test viewings – we took the first part, the shelter home, away. But I was stubborn and I didn't like this beginning to be removed. I think the shelter scene in the beginning somehow took the film to some other level. It became not just a story about 2 families, but really the story of many children from broken homes. It is a story about Finland too. That is why I insisted on this unusual beginning. We also have to make a shorter version for some TV channels in Europe, and then this opening scene will be cut back.

Christian Ok, but it will still be in there?

Mia I told my editor what to take out, but I haven't yet seen the shorter version.

Christian Anyway, after eight minutes the narrative moves into a traditional story telling scenario... with main characters. You follow them, they have conflicts and they develop. But these eight minutes do tell us about the world from a different point of view.

Mia Yes, this is from my original script, when I had three episodes: the story of the shelter home and the other two of Mika/Mette and Inka. But then – while editing – we mixed the stories, but the shelter home lingered there as a different kind of episode.

Marille Making an introduction into the theme of a documentary film is a common methodology. However, as you take such a long time for this shelter home episode, you do take the risk of losing your audiences.
After this introduction, the film has a quite traditional dramaturgy: The two parallel stories almost have a fictionalizing montage. We learn about the aims of the characters, (Miko and Inka), then about how they reach their aims – their first steps towards it, their second steps towards it and how by their third steps they reached their aim. Miko can move back in with his biological mother, Inka gets bad news from her Dad but can find a reason to live on. In the end there is an unhappy end for Miko and happy end for Inka – well that's how I read it. So in that way, this is a very classic storyline.

- Mia* Yeah, but it's not really planned like that. Of course the plots and the developments of the character were in place. But after the first phone call, both Inka and her mother get their hopes up and they are almost ready to go to meet the father. So in reality we were supposed to film only the phone call but because we stayed there for another 8 hours, the responding letter arrived in this time. So there she was, on a real high after the phone call, but in the letter she found out that she is not allowed to change her last name and we used this while editing. But I don't agree with your interpretation of the endings to both stories, one to be happy and one to be sad - there are many ways to read these outcomes.
- Marille* As I read it, we see Mette's hand at the window of the car, which is a repetition from the beginning of your film, so basically Mette is the new Inka, at least that is how I read it. And I thought that connotation was really good.
- Mia* It is supposed to be read just like that, but actually the hand in the end is the hand of my son. So, this ending scene is totally fictionalized.
- Christian* On that note, lets open up the discussion with the audience. Are there any questions? Jerzy?
- Jerzy Sladkowski* During your lecture you showed us a film about your son who is a kind of Chuck Norris. Where is this film? It seemed to be extraordinary or unusual! The locations are great.
- Mia* You're not the only one who says that. I knew that the locations were great when we were editing the film. This film was my previous film to "Forever Yours" and is called BIG BOY. But back to FOREVER YOURS: my producer and main financier of this film always says: Okay, if you can watch two minutes, or at the most eight minutes... and if by that time the film doesn't take you in, then it's off! My editor is the opposite: He doesn't want to edit any films that are shorter than three hours, so he fights for a very slow storytelling, maybe that's the reason why I haven't won any more prizes than in the one in Nyon!
- Jerzy* But I think FOREVER YOURS is an interesting film, but why did you use the RED camera? The RED is the killer for any photographer to work with, especially if he works with hand held shots?
- Mia* He had a rig and he is a big man! He knows what he is doing. The quality of his cinematography was really good. I wanted to use as much natural light as possible - the RED is really suited for this purpose. When we shot the film, the RED had just come out and my cinematographer wanted to work with this new camera.
- Marille* Thank you and can we open up the discussion to other people now?
- Audience* I want to ask you about being a mother of three children and a filmmaker at the same time. My question is very simple: how do you manage to make such good movies? I have small kids, but I don't manage to make films!

- Mia* Actually after I had my first child, I got so much more content into my films. I really had many ideas for films. So I think having a family supported my film-making ideas. Financially - of course - it is not wise to direct documentaries. I definitely need other sources of income. For example, I teach Yoga for money in addition. I also did most of the marketing myself, when my film got its cinema release in Finland. Actually my producer didn't like my involvements there, because he thought I should just be happy to have gotten "Forever Yours" into cinemas. But I fought for a good price. I tried to be really stubborn with money issues during the distribution process.
- Audience* Can you pay your crew, yourself or the people of your films?
- Mia* I don't pay anything to my characters. But when we go filming I bring food and sweets with me! When I got the Nyon prize I gave some money to the kids and the biological mother, but not to foster parents, because they all have more money than I have myself. When I was in Nyon to get the prize, the next morning, the foster mother of Inka phoned me and said congratulations. She said: "I read in the internet that you won a prize, and it's over 7'000 Euros" So then I didn't react, but later on when Inka asked again about the money I won, I gave her some hundreds and I said that I'm going to use the rest for my next film. I felt that I was really close with Inka and her mother. But when it comes to issues around money, it's can be difficult between people, whoever they are!
- Audience* I was just wondering... Your film was filmed with these poetic moments that are really beautiful... Like when Inka is in the grave yard feeding a squirrel in the background. Or when you film a fox that's running into the forest when you are driving... and I was wondering to what extent do those poetic associations happen in the editing room or to what extent do they just happen when you are shooting the film?
- Mia* The graveyard is full of squirrels, so that was no planned squirrel shot there... I wanted to include animals, because the families have really a lot of pets, and I had some kind of an idea to relate the kids to the pet animals in these houses. They have something in common, they are innocent, but they should be free. We also shot a large number of horses in the same area, but the editor didn't like them, so we did not use them. The fox was shot one day when we were driving and the fox made it into the film.
- Christian* Yes I have a question about the animals within the structure of the film. You introduce Inka in the first scene just as she gets a dog and this dog has also lost its mother. Then we see the situation with the cat. But after that, the dog disappears completely out of the film. In reality: wasn't this dog scene filmed much later? So do you purposely use the presence of a dog at the beginning of your film as an introductory element of the dramatic structure?
- Mia* That is true, we did think about this problem, in some phase of the editing. But then I think we just forgot it, because we don't do this level of analysis.

Audience I'm wondering, how do you work with a producer. If you just "go on filming" with your cinematographer, do you keep paying him? Where do you get your money, where does your salary come from?

Mia Actually, the budget of this movie was about 220'000 Euros. When we were looking for the finances, the Finish broadcasting companies were in a total crisis. We started filming Miko and Mette with very little money, but when they returned home, we could not wait any longer. We first used the development money that was given towards the project by the Finish film council.

Luckily I also had an artist grant for a year, and although this money was given for another project, I used some of it while waiting for the financing for "Forever yours". I paid the cinematographer and I also paid the camera rental fee and that's how we continued filming Miko and Mette. We also used up the development money that was given towards the project by the Finish film council and I did not pay myself. That was from Christmas one year until the summer of the same year, and then the ending scene happened the next autumn. When Miko and Mette were filmed I started to search for the other family. And Inka's story was filmed afterwards during the next spring. But by then we had almost all financing for the film together – and I got finally paid. It is financially hard, as you all know.

Marille Having you here gives us a chance to ask you about all secrets behind your films. I would like to come back to your film. "Forever Yours" leaves the audience with a secret at the end, and I do think that such secret at the end makes an audience very post reflective. In your film the secret is about what happened to the father. Did the father maybe kill the biological mother of Inka? Was this the reason why he's in prison?

My second question: who is Maria? You dedicated the film to her! And my third question was: In the shelter home we see a suicidal slit in someone's arm, and once, a cut on Inka's wrist. Can you tell us about these three secrets behind your film?

Mia Maria is my stepsister, and this is where the idea of the film came from. What happened to the mother? Of course Inkes father killed her mother. But it was clear all the time that I was not going to tell this in the film. And it's interesting what kind of secrets people have. For example it was not hard for Inka that I tell the audience that her father is in prison, but it was not possible for me to declare that her father had killed her mother.

Marille Aha, that's what I thought. I understand the reason why you don't tell it too, I think it's a good choice.

Mia Also, while screenwriting for the film, it was hard to know how many details I should tell about the past of my protagonists. I wanted the audience to also wonder about them. I didn't want to spell everything out like that the mother used to be a drug addict - I wanted my audience to identify with the protagonists and that they might think "Could I have been a depressed mother who is about to loose her children, or could I have been taken into care when I was a young child". So by not telling every detail about my protagonists I wanted to give the story more common references.

Christian Did I get this right? Inka doesn't know yet, that her father killed her mother?

Mia She knows. Yes. But she doesn't want others to know.

Audience I have two questions: first a simple one, how many people were you on the set? – And the second one, do you think children are less aware of what it means to be filmed than grown up people?

Mia We are always two on the set - me and the cinematographer. To your second question: Maybe children are less aware, but when they are aware, they are really honest and really judge you. For example when they get tired, they just go away, or they just fight you. They don't try to act, to be a nice person, as many adults do. So I don't know if it is "simpler" with kids or not.

Audience Yes, for example the scene in BIG BOY, when he walks towards the tent, do you think he would have reacted that way if there were no camera?

Mia No, he is really like that. I never told my son that I was planning to make a film; I said, "Now I'm going to buy a camera, and I'm making some camera tests" and that was how it started. After a while, he just got used to it, that I had a camera all the time, or that the camera was on the table in the kitchen. Eventually, he stopped asking about it. Of course I could not have done this in any other home, it was only possible with my own kid. If I had told him, that I was making a film about him, then he would have started acting.

Audience Did you ever consider of having a camera with you while discussing with Inka the death of her mother?

Mia No, I never thought about doing that. Because it's not a film about the father, and not a film about murder. It's a film about Inka and about other parts of Inka's personality. She is ashamed of her father but she is also afraid that she's inherited the same aggressive nature from her father.

Audience Why did you show Inka as such a gentle person then?

Mia Inka was not aggressive, she had her dark moments, but they never occurred when we were there with the camera.

Audience I felt that Inka was acting like such a good girl but that she must have dark moments. I saw this in her eyes!

Mia I think we were there when Inka was at a good age. A year after we stopped filming, she got into puberty and then it might have been harder to get close to her.

Marille Has Inka actually seen the film?

Mia Yes, she has seen the film. But whenever I approach a protagonist about filming I tell him or her, that I don't know, how the film will be in the end. I ask for the

permission to shoot whatever happens. I also tell my protagonists, that they should let me know after a shoot, if they felt uncomfortable, or if something occurred that they didn't want to be shown in the film. I also let them know, that they will see the rough cut of the film, when the editing is finished. During the making of the film I never show material to my protagonists, because I don't want them to think about how they look, how they act, what their home looks like. All this would unnecessarily influence the performances. When "Forever Yours" was finally edited into a rough cut, Inka was the first to see it. Her reaction was positive and she said: "Now I hope my relatives understand me finally!" This was a huge relief to me, that Inka saw the film as a potential tool to support her in her personal life! The second protagonist, who got to see the rough cut, was Sarita, the biological mother of Mika and Mette. She criticised the ending but she didn't argue for it to be changed. Then Inka's foster mother, she was not happy with how Inka was portrayed in the ending, because she looks too tired. But the scene also bothered her where Inka talks about how it would be to live with her biological parents. I simply said that I understand why she would not like this ending but that it has to stay the way it is. I also looked at the rough cut with Miko and Mette's foster mother, who thought she came across quite coldly. I agreed and we discussed possibilities how this could be changed. We both decided to film one more scene for the film, where the foster mother reads a post card to Miko and Mette. Even though we filmed this scene one autumn later, it gave the foster mother of Miko and Mette a better beginning in the film, which was more true to her relationships.

Christian Thank your very much Mia, for sharing both these insights and your secrets with us today.