

## How to Sleep Well While Directing a Film?

Panel discussion with filmmakers Mia Halme, Jerzy Sladkowski, Samir, and Tina Naber. Moderated by Sabine Gisiger.



*Sabine* Welcome everybody to this last round. We have talked about “Directing reality” for two days. What has intrigued me most and what I have also heard from a lot of people in the audience is the question: Where is the line between manipulating lives, in a good way, and interfering in them?

*Mia* I understand the question. But there is no answer. Maybe I can’t see where the line is – perhaps I can see it after 10 years, but I don’t see it while I am in the middle of making a film.

*Samir* I’m doing a film about my family at the moment. And I am already struggling with the whole family because they believe that I will be manipulative, and at the same time they are of course attracted by the fact that somebody is going to tell the family’s story. So my uncle in Paris already kicked me out of his house when I was shooting. Unfortunately, the camera wasn’t on, but then it’s always like that. But it was a real tragedy because he was my childhood hero, and it’s very difficult if somebody is always beating you if you admire him. After the film about the Iraqi-Jewish communists, my family asked me why I was focusing on the Jews. “We were also communists, why don’t you do the film about us?” And I asked them, “So will you stand up in front of a camera?” And they said, “If you send us the script.” I replied, “Come on, are you crazy? I am doing a film about you. I don’t script it, and even if I had to do a script for the foundation, which I found very funny doing, because I have now created another film, on paper, but that is another story.

*Sabine* (To Jerzy) Now what you tell your protagonists is, “Trust me now and blame me later.” And if you are in a community, let’s say with these girls, you have to make alliances and engage in intrigues, don’t you?

*Jerzy* Yes, you do, but for the sake of the film.

*Sabine* For you, it seems so easy to do that. For me, that would be so difficult – I would feel guilty all the time, because I wouldn't be open, you know. Also, I think that Samir and you are very similar. You told me about filming your family and how they keep asking you what will the other relatives say, and that someone is lying, and you're in the middle of all of that. For us Protestants from Zurich, this is very difficult.

*Jerzy* But I am a Catholic from Poland. Jesus Christ, surely we can't be that different. We are talking about grown-up people and we have a deal. And we are not going there for therapy but to make a film. That is clear from the beginning. We are making a film. And there are some consequences, and one of them is that I would like to get the best out of them for the sake of the film.

*Sabine* I understood that, but I wanted to try to understand whether, really, you always sleep well. I mean, I see your point, and I don't say your point is no point, but on a more personal...

*Jerzy* What do you want me to say? That you question my morality. Am I a bad guy or what?

*Sabine* No, what interests me is how you feel about things.

*Jerzy* I sleep very well because they sleep very well too. And usually, those films are loved most by the protagonists. Sometimes, I also affect the future of the protagonists in a positive way. This is what I am trying to achieve, and that's why I shift to comedy and humour, because it's easier and safer. I don't want to harm anyone. But these are grown-up people. The youngsters and children are a little bit different. You have to be more careful. You have to be really cautious and be aware, but there again children know that something is going on with the camera, with the film, and that this is a kind of deal. They are human beings and so they develop and grow. Different factors affect our lives: one of them is a short period being involved in a documentary film. It can't get that serious, as you seem to be afraid of. It is just a film, nothing more.

*Mia* I think that during the shoot I always sleep well. During the shoot, I feel I am making the right decisions. And then afterwards, I start thinking, then my ethics come to me. For example in *Big Boy*, there is a scene about my son stealing some Lego from his friends. He had been lying about it and then it comes out. I have a scene where we then see what he has stolen, and I tell him to bring them back, which is awful for him of course. And then he told me afterwards that I couldn't put that in the film. I said, no, of course not. And then I put it in the film all the same. Then I didn't sleep well, when it came out. But while doing the editing, I said to myself, it's not so dangerous – almost all people steal at some age. I said to my child, "Your mother has stolen, your father has stolen, your godfather has stolen, everybody steals... ." So it was a really good lesson for him *Audience laughs.*

He was really hurt by that, not only because I had promised something that I didn't keep. It was because he was afraid that his friends would see that scene. Afterwards I think that it wasn't a good decision of mine, but while doing the film

I was so involved in the film that I wanted to have that scene, also because it was a good scene. So what I mean is that while doing a film, I don't know what my morals and ethics are.

*Jerzy* We still don't kill people and we're following the 10 commandments. So all of us have our moral values. This is not that dangerous. It's a profession. Take a psychologist, or a surgeon, or a priest: they also take some decisions which are serious. This is nothing extraordinary. And if you are really a filmmaker, then you should sleep badly only if you show a bad film.

*Samir* I face this problem everyday during shooting because in my family dignity and your word of honour really mean something. Nobody's perfect, but they don't want to have it out in public. So in that sense I will respect that. I know so many things now and I will make a fiction film out of that material.

*Jerzy* But listen, when you are interviewing somebody, because you are trying to refer to traditional filmmaking – when you are interviewing a person, you always want to get something out of it, something special, something extraordinary. So if you show a part of an interview which is not necessarily positive for the hero, is that OK?

*Sabine* It's absolutely OK because it's face to face: I asked a question and I got an answer. And this is like an open line, or an open confrontation. If you talk to somebody openly and you tell him that you'd like to shoot this or that because you'd like to show this or that, then that for me is a completely different approach than telling somebody else to provoke the other person at that very moment. I just want to say that these are two different approaches. That's all.

*Jerzy* Alright, but let's speak about our profession. If you discuss matters before the camera starts rolling, then this person is telling you or someone else for "the second time."

*Sabine* No, no, absolutely not.

*Jerzy* What do you mean "not"?

*Sabine* No. You can have an open dialogue with a person before the camera is rolling. And then, when the camera is rolling, you can ask them exactly the same question in a different way .

*Jerzy* But this is dramaturgically not the same. The tension is gone. And the reception lies in the tension. You can see the emotion here, but first of all you should see the emotion there, that is, in how the viewers react. This emotion is important. And believe me, when somebody is warned, "Now we will talk about the divorce," you know it's not this. It's gone.

*Samir* OK, I agree on that, but on the other hand it's always also a question of the confidence and trust that you have with your protagonist. I mean if they really trust you, then they will do it on camera in the same emotional way.

*Jerzy* Do you believe that?

*Samir* Yes.

*Jerzy* I don't.

*Samir* OK, it's up to you to provoke. I believe that if somebody is really emotionally pushed to give a statement, then this is of course an emotional act driven by their subconsciousness. But they are also a human being, aware that they are acting – I am sure of that. Some people can do it better and some not. That's my opinion. That's why I never believe colleagues of mine who say about fiction films, "This is a bad actor." I think this is wrong. You have only chosen the wrong person for the wrong thing. And you are the director and you have made a wrong choice. We choose the right people to appear in front of our camera – or indeed the wrong ones, and then we have a problem.

*Sabine* So we all agree that it's very important to find the right protagonist. And then there are different ways of relating to them and of having an intense relationship. And of course we also agree that to be able to direct, there has to be this strong relationship. Then, of course, there are different personalities and directing styles. Perhaps that's one way of putting things .

*Samir* You remember that in the introduction to my film *BABYLON 2*, Carlos gets upset and says, "Yeah, you are stupid, what are you telling me?" Honestly, that was a repetition and at that time he was not an actor, he was just a singer. But he yelled so hard the first time that my sound engineer told me it was too loud. So I asked him, "You were very angry when you answered me. Could you do that again?" And he said OK. And he did it again, but of course it was less loud than in the first impression. So the good thing was that I had a reaction that worked. I mean, everybody was laughing. So I'm not sure, you know, what the meaning of...

*Jerzy* But you're not talking about authenticity; you're talking about credibility. And if you mean credibility, then it's OK, I buy it. But if you are talking about authenticity, it's not authentic.

*Samir* But these two things belong together.

*Jerzy* What is credible doesn't have to be authentic.

*Samir* (Sigh) Of course.

*Jerzy* And what is authentic should also be credible, but isn't always in the finished film.

*Sabine* Tina, would you like to comment?

*Tina* It was the initial question of where the limit is and how far you can go. I think that we all agree that when it comes to harming your characters or your heroes, there actually is a limit – if you do that, I think you won't sleep well. Yes, and so I

think everybody, including filmmakers, has to have a conscience. I think this is an agreement we can make. The crucial question is whether what you are going to show will harm the character.

*Sabine* OK, I think it's time for questions.

*Audience* We were talking about deep emotions, especially that a documentary movie can convey to the public. The documentary has to be real for the audience. So if a documentary includes too many fictionalising elements, it loses the connection to these deep feelings. Personally, my main problem is when the authenticity is lost.

*Tina* Yeah, I think it's always up to the viewer. It's the viewer's decision if he believes the filmmaker or if he doesn't. The filmmaker can manipulate that decision, but it depends on your codes, on your viewing experiences, and pretty much also depends on your background.

*Jerzy* Sometimes, I think that as a viewer you mix up two things. You can achieve the same by observing something and by interfering. And I bet that you won't see any difference. And I have a feeling that Mia observed more about the situations than I did. But actually, she arrived at more or less the same result: her observations were very close to the protagonists, very intimate, and very true. But she used a different method. Why? Because she chose the right method for the situation, and I chose my method for my situation. Importantly, however, each was credible and each was authentic because this is what we deal with, that is our *métier*. I have a feeling sometimes that all of you are very suspicious; you seem to think that this bastard is cheating us, he is making features... I don't have a problem with that. I would say it openly if I were staging the film or something like that. If I made a staged film, I would be proud of it.

*Audience* I have a question about interviews. This is for both directors, because we have seen *VODKA FACTORY* and *FOREVER YOURS*. How did you prepare the interviews with your protagonists and how do you choose quotations?

*Jerzy* I think the more natural, the better. For me, it's best to choose parts from situations, different discussions, and dialogues, and to use this material as a voiceover. Because for me, voiceover is a special construction in that we are using a kind of protagonist narration or monologue and covering it with images. What I did in my film and actually Mia did the same, was to cover part of the dialogue with images.

*Mia* In *FOREVER YOURS*, I had one part voiceover when Inka sits in a ball chair in a forest. And as I told you, I recorded the sound only when me and Inka were there. There were no images at the same time and I didn't prepare the scene. We were just talking. Of course I knew somehow what I was going to ask her and what we would end up talking about, that is, that we would talk about her relatives... but maybe that's why I don't use many interviews. I don't like any techniques that tell you how to sneak into your character's world and make her say something you

want to hear. In BIG BOY, I have lots of voiceover. It was recorded in the evenings when the boy was really tired and he yelled, "Mother, come here." Then I went to his room and I had the microphone with me and he started telling me his worries, for example, or what he had done that day, and so on. And then I used those pieces as a voiceover. So it wasn't an interview. I feel I don't make interviews. I just discuss things with people.

*Jerzy* Besides, and I mention this since this is a professional discussion, I avoid questions to the last very moment. I rather stay silent, because people usually take over. When I sit down with somebody and we have a drink, he starts talking. Then I can push him with something. But these are methods for getting the best material. Of course the easiest way is to ask him, "Are you happy?" – "No, I'm not happy." But I mean that if you hold back and then suddenly he says, "Well, life is a shit, you know." And then things start happening. This is a totally different sound, it's a different expression. These are methods for getting it. And if you say this is not fair play, I don't care. It's a method for getting the best out of the protagonist.

*Audience* I found the discussion about authenticity versus credibility very interesting. Samir said that it was kind of the same thing, but Jerzy said it's different. For me it's hard to understand when I see it as a spectator. I think you don't really care if it really is authentic. I mean then it kind of becomes the same. So it matters more if it seems authentic or credible to you. So I would like to know, perhaps from Mia, how she sees the difference between the two terms.

*Mia* Maybe I don't care. Because I think I make films that are from real life. That's what I said during my lesson. That I think I film only such situations that happen in life, and that also happen without a camera. And I don't know if anything is authentic. What in life is authentic? I don't know. For example, I think in films we see almost everything, also in documentaries. In documentaries, I have seen babies born, I have seen death, the moment of death in a documentary. I don't know, I don't expect authenticity in that sense. I make a film. I don't see authentic moments. Maybe I don't want to see them. I think life is authentic. And film is film.

*Audience* Yeah, so Jerzy, where exactly is the difference in your view?

*Jerzy* My point was that what is credible does not have to be authentic. Because this is your imagination. I make a sequence, right? I shoot somebody who is crying, or somebody who is laughing. I provoke him towards that reaction. And you believe it's a real situation, when in fact it's not. This is a matter of editing. It's a matter of many things that you think something is real whereas in effect it's just a construction or a vision of reality. So it's not authentic, but it looks authentic and that is what makes it credible. All filmmaking is about that, actually. But even in documentaries, I mean, sometimes we ask people to do something. Everybody does this ... and even those filmmakers who believe in interviews sometimes ask people to go for a walk for example. And even in those fair-play films, where interview is the basis, you sometimes ask a protagonist to have a walk. Is that

authentic? No, isn't authentic, because it's ordered. But it looks authentic, so it's credible. And this is the key issue. But it might be authentic and not look credible. It depends on how it's covered with the camera. Vice versa, when something IS authentic, then we say, ah well, it's too good to be true. It's too good to be credible. Sometimes, we cut out the pieces which are so good that nobody would believe them, and I have good examples for that. So credibility is the key issue. This is the key point. And, as Mia says, I actually don't care if I have full coverage in reality or not; if it's credible and if it fits in the film, I take it.

*Sabine* OK, thank you very much to all of you on the stage, to all of you in the audience. I hope you enjoyed our discussion and that it has provided food for thought.