

## How to direct life?

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I used to consider my directing methods very intuitive and unmethodical. But when I started to prepare for this seminar here in Zürich called 'Directing Reality' I began to compare my methods for documentary filmmaking with common directing methods for fictional films. In fiction, storytelling is often based on stirring up emotions about a main character who you can identify with. Feelings that the audience has towards this character may fluctuate between entertainment and empathy.

The best films I have made all deal with a theme that I know inside out. This does not mean that all my films document my personal life but they always make a portrait of a character who I can really identify with. For example in *FOREVER YOURS*, the main character relates to my stepsister who used to live in a foster family home. I learnt from her about her life between two families and how it feels when a child's love is very divided. However, I could not have made a film about my stepsister – because this was too close to me and I may have lost the broader theme of the film. I had to find someone else to represent these realities of a foster child.

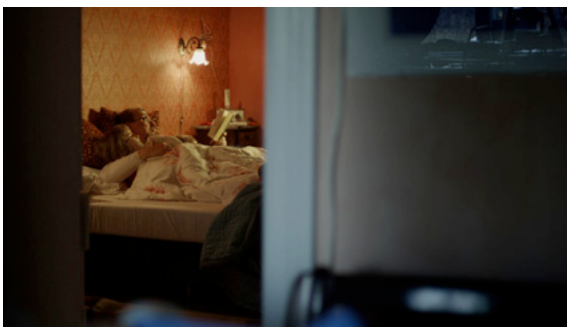
My previous film, *BIG BOY*, portrayed the busiest years of childhood through the eyes of my firstborn son, a quick-tempered boy about to start school. However, the theme for this film did not directly originate from his personality, but rather from the demanding and stressful life of a little boy in general. I then chose my own son to represent this theme.

This reveals a great deal about my approach to directing: The themes I choose for my films are emotionally very close to my own life. Because the topic is close to me, I know it inside out even before the filming starts. I know, in advance, what will probably happen to the life of my characters and I become familiar with their feelings and can relate to them. It is possible for me to guess how they will react to a given situation and I know what I can hope for as well. In these familiar situations I'm more likely to be able to detect the coincidences that are about to happen. These coincidences make a film more life-like. When I'm familiar with a situation, I try to feed the development of the events and, in particular, try to be there when they occur.

I often like to talk about films in general, not documentary films or fictional films, and I don't like to define the stylistic devices used in each. However, in practice I have noticed that watching a documentary film encourages the audience to have a mythical level of trust in everything as authentic, even though we all know that no film can portray objective levels of "real" truth. Instead, it is always the director's interpretation of reality.

### **Casting and Character Plot Development**

The pre-production planning for FOREVER YOURS took a long time, because it not only meant finding the people to appear in the film but also delving into the topic on an emotional level. I met many foster parents and biological parents as



well as their children. I observed the circumstances of the families at home and felt the atmosphere. How many pets did they have? What did they argued about? How did they raise their kids? I saw how tired the strong foster mothers were and how silent the fathers were, but how wise the children really were. I felt that finding the right people was not possible until I myself was emotionally ready to start filming. Casting is very important for the kind of films that I tend to direct. Very little information is conveyed in my films and I do not care much for plots, but rather for tensions and feelings between people, which can significantly reveal behaviour in our world. Therefore, for me the casting of characters in a film is a process that is partly intuitive and partly based on reasoned arguments. I have tried to focus on the fact that there must be an on-going process in the character's real life or a process that can be expected, a process

that may result in a change or a conflict, such as moving out of a house, starting school, changing family names or losing weight. Representing a process facilitates character development throughout the narration of the film, as it causes turning points. It also forces the story to be limited to the process. This method of thinking is familiar from fiction film screen writing when characters are developed in a manner that includes a direction of purpose.

Of course the casting children is far more challenging than casting adults. It would have been impossible to screen test the children and then say that they were not right for the film, especially with children in custody, who do not need to face another experience of rejection. When I went to meet a number of families, I never had a camera with me, and I always said I was there to learn more about the topic, not that I was looking for characters for a film! Looking for this process early on in the casting phase makes it easier to write the surface plot script for the characters. For example: when the children are moving back to their biological mother, we know the purpose of their process. There are also some twists that belong to this process, such as a visit by people from social services and the subsequent tensions this causes. A farewell party will take place, and it is likely to be emotional.



So the development of the emotional plot of the characters is often constructed in the editing phase, because, unlike in fiction, this plot is impossible to control in real life. An arch like process is sometimes constructed for a character in documentaries too, so that the character makes some kind of a discovery about the greater things in life and becomes a better person. This is constructed with narrative methods that are very familiar in fiction. For example, when

the main character silently gazes into distance at a dramatically appropriate moment or an apt remark is made by a narrative voice-over who expands on the character's view on life. But a happy ending that clean ups any loose ends is also often the goal in documentaries, too. In *FOREVER YOURS*, I decided to go for a confusing solution instead of a happy ending. If the ending were happy, the film would have ended with the farewell party at the foster family's home and the teenage girl would receive a school award at the end of the term. This would have been very far-fetched, considering the real life of the children who were the main characters.

#### **Some of the simplest methods of my work as a director**

I do not provoke events or feelings by creating situations that would otherwise not really take place in the life of my characters. But I do use various methods to return to a situation that has happened at an earlier stage, or to provoke an event that takes place regularly in a person's life. This might require me to feed a topic into the dialogue or introduce an object into the situation. The most important factor is, to schedule days for the shoot on the very days that something is likely to happen. So I have to keep in touch with the people in the film so that I will know when I have to be there.

For example, in one of the scenes in *FOREVER YOURS*, the teenage girl is talking on the phone with her father for the first time in years. He is in prison. The scene is actually authentic because the foster mother of the girl called me the day before and told me that the girl wanted to call her father and ask again for his permission to change her family name. I asked the foster mother to hold her back until the next day so we could be there with a camera. You can just imagine how different the scene would have been if we have tried to re-enact the phone call with other people that the real conversation that actually took place on the phone.

I also use the method of tiring my characters. We tend to work long hours on the set, always a little longer than we have agreed on in advance. When a day of filming starts, people often control what they do and say, but after eight hours of filming, they start to wear out and become themselves. In addition, I let the single scenes continue to run on further, past the moment it seems like we have already stopped filming.

In *FOREVER YOURS*, I employed a method of asking the mother to bring up an earlier conflict that had taken place in the family, without the daughter knowing about my request. The girl had been involved in Facebook commentary that her foster mother regarded as inappropriate and so she closed her Facebook

account. A loud argument had followed and the daughter had locked herself in her room. The foster mother brought this up when we were filming, and so even though we did not capture this exact drama, we did manage to witness a heated conversation because of it. This method is borrowed from directing fictional movies, where one actor might be given information that the other actor does not have in order to act out a scene. The purpose of the method is often to allow the character to step away from acting and to achieve a fresh form of expression and more authentic reactions.



In my previous film *BIG BOY*, I introduced provocative items to recreate a situation on camera, that can take place regularly in everyday life: I gave the main character a water gun, knowing that it would not take long before he aimed it at his younger brother and a fight would break out. I filmed *BIG BOY* by myself, which meant that setting the schedules for filming was easy. For instance, when our pet lizard died, we did not bury him until there was a convenient

time to film the children and their emotions.

An image that followed this burial of the lizard was shot at a different time. I asked the boy to pose in front of a window and blow on it. He was not happy at all about doing this and started crying, claiming that he was no actor. However, in the editing phase, I used this reaction of tears in a scene that follows the scene where the boy mourns over the death of the lizard. However, I do not consider this as fictional narration, because in reality the boy did have had a dramatic bout of crying after the lizard had been buried, but I had already put my camera away. I ran to get it but sometimes my role as a mother overcame the filmmaker in me and I discovered afterwards that the camera had not been switched on. In another example: the main character my son, was jumping on a trampoline with some girls. I went to bring him inside to do his homework and took my camera with me, because I knew he would not want to come in and a crisis would ensue. I also sometimes tired him out with tasks that were too challenging for him. He went camping in a tent in the backyard with the girl from next door and wanted to take them something to eat. I gave him a very heavy tray to carry and just as I expected: he dropped the tray and lost his temper.

All of these are examples of manipulating and directing the events, but they all result in many situations that do take place without the camera being present. Even manipulated situations must be new and surprising in some sense, and I think those authentic moments and reactions have a great power in documentary films. It is the duty of the director to capture these moments.

Sometimes, when I have tried to reproduce on camera what happened in real life and felt that I failed. In *FOREVER YOURS*, there is one scene that was re-enacted: the scene with the foster parents having coffee in the kitchen, but here the characters are playing themselves in a situation that takes place at every week. Even though I did not explicitly direct the characters into saying anything, they knew that I was expecting certain comments and offered them to the camera without any fresh emotions. With editing, the scene became tolerable, but not good.

### Maintaining the illusion of reality

In FOREVER YOURS, I used some fictional methods explicitly at the beginning of the film. There is a car with close ups of a small child and also a scene where a teenage girl sits in a ball chair in the forest and talks about her relatives. The interviews for these scenes were pre-recorded without images, and we intentionally filmed image material that was distinctly different from the overall narration. This was the only segment in the film where a narrative voice was used.



After viewers have seen these scenes, we got some feedback saying that they did not know if the film was documentary or fiction and this was distracting. I am pretty sure that this results from also using this structure at the beginning, as its visual style may offer false instructions about the interpretation of the film. For some, it comes across as fiction to some viewers, whereas for others it introduces the ambience of the film.

The director normally directs the crew, but we were just two - the cinematographer and I. Sometimes my selection of the cinematographer is not only about his professional qualities, I had two good candidates for shooting my previous film and selected the one I knew that was good with kids. I recorded the sound with boom and wireless microphones and my cinematographer shot with the RED digital camera. With the extra equipment needed this camera was very big. I was happy with this, certainly the characters knew when my cinematographer was shooting! We did not try to hide the camera or shoot secretly. As a director I believe in fair play!

As I see it, in the editing phase, the limits of expression of documentary films are there to be experimented with. It think that it is acceptable to combine any image and audio materials in a scene if it helps to achieve the atmosphere and content you are looking for. How the film portrays of the characters must, however, stay true to life. The viewer's trust about the authentic documentary features of the film and the illusion of reality must also be preserved.

In one scene of FOREVER YOURS, the children are being taken back to the foster family in a car. The boy is sitting in the backseat, and asks if the parents – seated in the front – could also stay at the foster families house for a while. The woman almost begins to cry and her partner looks at her. Originally, we cut another image of this reaction, but it made the scene seem too fictional. The outcome appeared as if we had shot the scene with two cameras or had made a second take, shot from the direction of the other "actor". The scene actually turned out too smooth as a result of the editing and, in order to retain the documentary elements, we decided to edit it in a much less sophisticated way.

**Directing people – how do you get close to people?**

The most intriguing challenge about directing is to get the people in the film to feel relaxed and accepted. In this, directing has a lot of common with professions that require care. When a massage therapist rubs my back, she can only make me relax by first relaxing herself. In order to help the main characters relax, I have to feel comfortable and be on the same level with them, and with the children as well.

What "feeling comfortable" means varies from one film to the next, from one person to the next. Some people feel safe when I am in a clearly distinguished professional role, others when I am my own, uncertain self. I have to discover just the right way to be with each individual. Whether or not I like the characters in my film as persons, I try to feel sympathy towards them and understand why they do what they do.

During the filming, I often feel that I can relate to some of the people on an emotional level and I think this is one way of getting close to these people. I share my thoughts with the people I film, but in particular I want to leave them a lot of space. In my experience, everyone wants to talk about him or herself, if someone would only listen. Everyone is flattered when someone is interested. Sometimes I give people who appear in the film, specific tasks related to the making of the film, so that they can feel we are making the film together. The biological mother in *FOREVER YOURS* was an excellent manager and used to organise our filming days. This made her feel important and – above all – good at something. Children have been allowed to record audio and I have let the grown-ups shine with their strong points in front of the camera, even when I have known that I will never use the material in the film.



To end the lecture I refer to the beginning of it: I try to maintain the illusion that my work as a director is intuitive and not based on any particular method. I believe that the ability to trust one's intuition is important for any director and that they can lose that if they get too fixed on plans and methods, or theories. A film is not an intact story, but neither is the life that is portrayed in the film. A film comes into being, as a result of many single moments and situations. Plunging into these moments and situations is what I think that directing is all about.