

## Iikka Vehkalahti

### To Find the Mind

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IIKKA VEHKALAHTI When I speak, you can interrupt me. And I will be very messy, jumping from one thing to another one, and if you disagree, that would be marvellous. I will first tell three stories:

My friend who was in Sources before told me that for her the main problem is that when you are mentoring you become one of the owners of the film. You go *into* the film. You fall in love with the film. And when you fall in love with the film, everything changes. You no longer look at the film from the same critical perspective. I know all about this. Every film that I support or that I'm involved in I think is fantastic. They're really great, and I cry when I watch the rough cuts. I'm really enthusiastic.

Then when the film is finished, and two months have passed, and I look at it, I say, "What the fuck is this? Why were these twenty minutes left like this?" Okay, they took out fifteen minutes but they should have taken out another ten or fifteen minutes. But at a certain stage you lose a little bit of this distance to the film.

Another story is somebody asked me why I don't like to watch rough cuts together with other people. Sometimes the producer will invite someone from the Finnish Film Foundation, a few other people and me, and we'll all watch the cut together. Or my assistants ask to come see the rough cut. I don't like this at all. I think it's like this because, first, when a person is sitting next to you, it immediately affects you in one way or another. Your concentration is not the same as if you were alone.

I like to watch the rough cut when the producer and director are sitting in front of me and I'm in back of them, because then I know that they are not following my reactions, my body language. So I'm totally concentrated.

Whenever you have two or three people discussing with the director, you don't build the kind of a connection that's really needed if you're a good mentor. I don't say it's the same as falling in love or seducing a woman or seducing a man, but there is absolutely something if you're working with someone during a very crucial time on the film, that you should build that kind of bond that you understand each other fully and you are capable of expressing yourselves freely. And you are not necessarily capable of expressing yourself freely when there are other people there because immediately your defence system is stronger. I don't mean only the director's defence system but also my own. And because of politeness and various other reasons, the discussion of three people often becomes compromised. It doesn't mean I'm correct and this is the way, but in one way I feel we are not capable of going far enough to look at what we could find in the discussions.

AUDIENCE For the director, it's more difficult to be weak if there are many people around.

VEHKALAHTI Absolutely.

AUDIENCE That's a critical part. You have to be able to be weak and honest.

VEHKALAHTI And it's also what I call being stupid. To be a good mentor, you have to have the courage to be stupid. By stupid, I mean that you ask those stupid questions that you don't necessarily dare to ask because of juvenile reasons. We can talk about this a little bit later, but I mean being stupid and honest and saying, "I don't understand something, I don't really know something." Very often I feel that people don't dare to ask these stupid questions. But okay, we'll come to that later.

The third one I found out when I was a filmmaker and I showed my rough cut to the commissioning editor, and he fell asleep during the middle of the screening. I thought: What an asshole! Then later when I started working as a commissioning editor and started watching rough cuts, I really struggled to not fall asleep very many times. Why? Is it because the film is so bad or boring? No. It's because when you look at the film, and you really try to see the structure of the film, the emotional flow of the film, you try to see the details that are disturbing you, and you try to reconstruct them differently, and you try to think what you can say that will penetrate the filmmaker. It requires a huge concentration of energy. For instance, I have been carrying around one DVD that has been to six countries, and I have been postponing watching this rough cut just because I haven't been ready to see it. I know there will be huge problems with it, and my mind has not been ready for this yet. It requires a huge concentration of energy, your mind's concentration, when you are seeing a rough cut and discussing it with the filmmaker.

Ok, and the fourth story is that I've noticed that every time when I meet a filmmaker, and when it's the most important time of the discussion, I take off my spectacles. I need to see you, but somehow I feel like I see you better when I take off my spectacles. That's the time when I look at the person to find out what he's all about.

I've been thinking about what it means to be a good mentor. 'Mentor' – I hate this word! I call it 'professional supporter'. Even as a commissioning editor, I still feel it's being a professional supporter. That means when you are mentoring, you're a commissioning editor, producer, or an expert or whatever you are. Your task is to support the filmmaker and to make the film that he or she wants to do. I think it's so cliché; you've been told it 600 times. But I still think it's the most essential thing in the commissioning or producing or editing. You are just helping and supporting a person in making the film that *he* or *she* wants to do.

Let me explain what I mean with the "professional supporter". This professional supporter term came when we were doing a series in southern African with a huge number of filmmakers, half of them first-timers. We brought some of the best filmmakers in the world to work with them. You are bringing teachers, you are bringing tutors, you are bringing filmmakers. We tried to emphasize that when the best filmmakers in the world travel to southern Africa to work with first-time filmmakers, they didn't come to take over the filmmakers. They came to *help* the filmmakers make their films.

John Webster was one of ten. I think it was with John that we used the term 'coitus interruptus'. You know that there are two different types of professional supporters: those who are there with the filmmaker from the beginning to the end. These are generally the producers. But then you have another kind of professional supporters who drop in. These include the cinematographers, commissioning editors and visiting mentors. We tried to use a method that when the filmmaker starts here, people came in and spent one day, two days or three days with the filmmakers and with the film. In the best ways they fall in love with the film. They really like the film, and they give everything to the film. They just take over the film, and then we move them away. That's why I called it 'coitus interruptus'. Just when they're getting really close, you take them out and put in another one, who perhaps gives them totally opposite kinds of direction or advice. And then maybe a third one comes, and suddenly the filmmaker can become confused from so many different comments and bits of advice.

According to this theory, the only way to survive is to aim your own rope. Regardless of what anyone says, you are aiming your own rope. That's why the task of professional supporters is to strengthen the filmmaker's vision to make the film he wants to make. It sounds very simple. Of course, there are cases where the filmmaker is doing something that is totally bullshit. So then you have to think: What does he really want to do?

One of the most important things in the process of mentoring is that you always have to trust and strengthen that you as the filmmaker see what you see in a unique way. Nobody else sees what you see in the same way. It's absolutely something that no one else can do. It's your idea and it's really unique. For two years, Thomas Balmès, who made *Babies* and *Nokia: A Decent Factory*, sent me something like six different proposals of 2-3 pages length. Or he called me and said, "Now I'm going to do this kind of film." Every time I said, "Fantastic! This is a really great idea. Go forward," knowing already quite surely that he would never do that. You knew that he was searching for something. But if you had said, "I can hear from you that you are really not interested in this," it would have pushed him down. But you want to support him and say, "This is a fantastic idea. Really great. Make this worldwide film about the borders in Mexico and everywhere." He had written a big treatment. Or make the film in Nigeria, where they have these hyena men. Fantastic idea. He even made a trailer of that. I never really thought he would do it. But you should support the filmmaker's ideas.

You might ask, well if it's total bullshit, why should I support it? That's a totally different thing. You have to support the idea of the filmmaker onto you. For instance, two days ago a filmmaker came to me. He had got some money from the Finnish Film Foundation. He had some material. His idea was to do something about new people in Finland. Not the Somalis, not the Nigerians, but Estonians, who are working in huge numbers in Finland today. So many of the workers around here, even the ones who worked on the roof of my house, are Estonians. I think it's a wonderful idea about the Estonians in Finland.

So what had he done? He had shot interviews with four people. One is training in the forest and talking. One is sitting on the sofa. And another one is happily sitting in a café. The characters were incredibly good. A young fellow from Estonia working in Finland, whose job is to select other new Estonian workers and place them in different companies. So you can look at this whole movement of people coming in. His 67-year-old mother, who is the former owner of a factory in Estonia, is working as a cleaning lady in private houses in Finland. And the man is married to a beautiful Somalian woman, who is pregnant.

BUT: I hope he never hears me say that it's badly shot. But he said he was going to make a film based on these interviews, and that he wants to show how Estonians have been living. That can never be a film. So now the question is how to make a filmmaker see that he has something that nobody else has. How to get him to ask himself: How about if I get a really good producer? How about if this entire film is shot totally differently? How about if there is a professional cinematographer? And how about if instead of focusing on four protagonists, I concentrate on only one, and he leads us to the other characters? How will he accept this?

One thing I've discovered as a mentor is that every filmmaker is sort of jealous: This is *my* film. Don't interfere with this. It's not like this in Finland anymore, but maybe 10-15 years ago filmmakers made their films alone from the beginning to the end because they were the authors and said, "I'm the filmmaker." They didn't accept that even though you had the idea for the house, that you are not necessarily the best plumber or best painter or best carpenter or best architect. You have the idea. Why don't you use other professionals to create the house as you want to have it? It sounds very stupid but it's really important. Every South African director [in the Steps for the Future program likka produced] felt "this is *my* film" even though they had the best editor in the world working for them. Or they had the best directors helping them. No, they were like, "This is *my* film!"

So in this case with this fellow who recently came to me, what make him feel like it's his film when it's not? It cannot be based on badly-shot interviews. He wanted to shoot it by himself. It doesn't look very good. What makes him say, "It's *my* film." He has one of the absolutely best characters that I have seen in a long time for a cinema verité film. Absolutely fantastic character. He has that kind of relationship that looks like the filmmaker had worked half a year to get. So you have to emphasize what is his ownership of the film. And when he feels it strongly enough, then he will be ready to accept others who are not taking over but who are supporting the film to make it the best film possible.

So how about when the filmmaker wants to make a total bullshit film? In this case, if we say we should support the filmmaker's idea to make the film, should I also say, "This is a fantastic idea that you shoot by yourself and the whole film is based on the interviews of the people on the sofas and in the cars, and it's 50 minutes. Fantastic." No. You have to support *why* he is doing the film. The motivation reveals the murderer. It's Agatha Christie. When you know the motivation, you know the murderer. In that sense, with this film or with any other film, the stupid question for commissioning editors to ask the filmmaker or producer is: Why are you doing this film? Why do you want to make this film? It's really a stupid question, but it's the most important question to ask: Why do you want to make this film? What is your motivation to make the film? Because if you find out the motivation and what you want to do, then it's easy to say: "Well if this is your motivation, then why are you doing this kind of interview film? Your motivation, why you want to do the film could be better realized with a different form." What you're proposing is only the form for his idea.

Another example. Yesterday I met with a young filmmaker who has some really brilliantly shot material of a mafia family in New York and Finland. The father is involved. And she used to be married to the son. The mother and father fight all the time. One fellow has been the gunman. Then there is her own son, who is in Finland. And she wants to fly to New York with her son. We discussed for one hour why she was making this film. Is it a film about the uncle? Who is the protagonist of the film? Why are you making this film? And she said: I want to make a film about the union of the family, how our visit and grandsons can unite the family. It's actually a film about how the tradition of crime is going from one generation to the next, and the father is afraid of this. There were all these kinds of very conceptual things.

But then when we started talking about totally different things like boyfriends, are you married, are you keener of your Brooklyn mafia family than your Finnish family, she said: "I had a boyfriend. He had two boys who were eight and six. This whole film started because my boy was playing with his boys. I'd never given my son any guns, but these boys had real guns. And my son took the gun and he was shooting at them like this in full anger. I had never seen my son like this. I started shaking, and I thought: I never want my son to become like that." It was actually a reflection of his Brooklyn family background. And I felt that it was a very unique experience that she had had, something where she could say: This is something I *don't* want. I don't want my boy to be like them even though I want my boy to belong to that family. ( I mean, everyone wants his son to have a grandfather.)

So somehow I think this true emotional motivation was actually the whole beginning for the film, and also the focus of the film. *The reason was her son*. So who is the protagonist of the film? Why do the other people enter the film? I think it becomes quite clear. You can begin to see the film. So *the motivation is very often the key to focusing the film*. We don't have to talk about less is more and focus, focus, focus. You already know that. But how to find this focus and not force it onto somebody? I think it's very essential to find this focus and motivation.

It's often been my experience that I meet filmmakers who are hiding their motivation. They give you a conceptual reason to make the film. If you are pretending in your behaviour with others that your

reason for doing the film is something other than what it really is, then this will affect the way you make the film. It can be that you don't know why you are doing the film. That's okay. No problem. Or you just want to make a great film and go to festivals and such. That's okay, too. That motivates, but it has to be that motivation because when you know the motivation you also know the intention.

That's another part because the motivation is very often connected to the intention. My goal or intention is that this film will change something, it will change the people's lives, people will start to think something. This will affect how fathers and sons cope with each other. Fantastic. My own experience motivation is: I don't want my son to become like that. I hope other families can also see what it's like to be a single mother, etc. But if your motivation is clear, the intention is clear, then it's also easy to separate motivation and intention from the film. This is what I experience all the time.

AUDIENCE It's really poignant what you've been saying. I've been developing this one film idea, and I've been presenting it to commissioning editors. Everybody loves the concept. It's a perfect concept. Everybody thinks it will be a great film. But I don't have any idea what the film is because I don't know about my motivation and what I want to do with the film. I just have a great concept. I've been waiting for over a year now to find a reason to do the film. [audience laughter] It's true.

VEHKALAHTI I had one filmmaker who never knew why she was doing her films. She didn't even know why she was shooting something. But it was very obvious to the editor. So I don't mean that you have to know. It's okay if you don't know. But pretending something or hiding or not thinking or not trying to find out is not okay.

What I was trying to say is that we're coming to one of the most important things, i.e. *that motivation and intention are different than the film*. This is something people don't understand. I face this all the time. Your motivation doesn't make your film. This is actually a long story about how somebody will see your film. How do you as a filmmaker give the audience space to be a creator of the film and not only the object of your intentions and motivations? How can they become the creator of the film that you have done so that it also becomes their own ownership? Very often this motivation badly affects the film. I call these 'flag first films'. Very many films in the United States are 'flag first films': I had a motivation, I want to save the world, so I want to show the film world like I would like the world to be. Or I'm also putting this message first.

For Finland, it's not such a big thing. But Iris Härmä is doing a film in Uganda. The first trailers were for me 'flag first'. Her motivation was to tell the people how important sexual education is, and how the men are like this, and feminists in power. Great. But that's not the film. The film is what takes place in the film. If it's a cinema verité film, then you have to accept that the word is different than your intention or your motivation.

When mentoring, it's really one of the best things a producer can do to the film is accept the motivation. Accept the filmmaker's intention. Use them to focus the film. When you have focused it enough, then you can say: Now forget the motivation and intention. Let's look at what the film is. Because if your story is good enough, it's always stronger than your motivation. Whatever you scream or put there at the end of the film, it's always weaker than if I'm having those kinds of conclusions while watching the film.

Ok, let's go more to the question: how to find the film. How to see what the director wants to do after you know his or her motivation and intention.

Very often I say that the best films start from something very, very small – very small incidents that push everything into motion. And actually, the film is very very often clear in the beginning. And you see what is coming out: You see the film.

If it's an issue film, you have all kinds of different possibilities. It can be thematic. It can be cinema vérité. It can be one protagonist. It can be worldwide. It can be essay. Whatever. So it's an issue film. But you have to accept that the filmmaker wants to make a film about this issue because it's so important.

When the filmmaker reacts to something he has already seen, then it's a matter of further developing that into a film. Actually to shape the road to make the film. That's in the beginning. It's like a treatment discussion or development discussion or a production discussion. Your task is that the filmmaker has the idea and you are helping him or her find the road where this idea will crystalize or find the best way. It can be different ways. There can be two, three, four different ways to do it. No problem. But just what is the best way for the filmmaker when he or she has this idea?

Now when we find out the motivation, this helps us focus. Then when we leave out the motivation and intention, we can talk to the filmmaker about what the film is. We can ask: What do you think your film is?

I'm a simple man. I'm from a small village, so I think very simply. So a simple thing to ask is what road has the filmmaker already selected for making his or her film, and which are the basic roads? For me, to be very simple, if it's a thematic film, then it's the point-of-view of the filmmaker. It can be an essayistic film. It can be a personal film. Whatever. It's a thematic film, no problem. It's okay. Don't push them to make it into a story. Then it's a question of how you are doing the thematic film. That's enough.

If it's another story film, then I ask what helps the filmmaker see what makes the film flow? I'm careful about asking: What is your story? Because I have found out that the story in our mind often leads to conceptualizing your film to make there be a story. That is formalism. Like when I have been interviewed to a journal and the journalist builds the story of his article around the lunch we had together: what I have ordered, what I have eaten, how happy I was with the lunch. That is not a story.

For every mentor who is a producer or anybody, it would be really good to think again and again about what is really the story. Of course there are three acts. Of course there is a conflict or dilemma that helps a lot. But what else makes the film flow? What is the timeline? Because I believe that whatever anyone says about the timeline, film still has a timeline. It starts and it ends. You can break it or do whatever, but it has this. By nature it is like that. You can even find this on the Internet.

What is the story? Is the story a narrative story – a protagonist dilemma or conflict which is reflecting the universal values, experiences or emotions? Ask questions and then listen to the answers.

Because when trying to find the film – you know this already, but I'll repeat it – the question is that you are listening. Listening, questioning, listening and listening so that you start to find her or his mind. You start to see how he sees the film, not how you would like to see the film. Every good filmmaker, when there is an issue or a very good story for a film, starts to make the film. To see his or her own film. And there is also the danger. My experience is that the filmmakers or directors are not necessarily the best mentors and tutors. [audience laughter] Do you know why?

## AUDIENCE No.

VEHKALAHTI Because if you are a good film director, you are constantly developing and strengthening your unique way of seeing the world and society and people. That makes you so good because you see differently than others. And then you are strengthening that capability in you. You are becoming a better and better artist. It can be quite difficult to come out from there and see that another fellow wants to do a totally different kind of film. But for the past fifteen years, I've been developing certain ideas about film, and this person wants to make a *totally* different kind of film. You understand? I've seen this so many times that people start to propose, consciously or unconsciously, to him or her a film that he or she would like or could make. In some cases, it works marvelously. Then you are a master and he's your student. But when it's a matter of a filmmaker who has his or her own voice or own way of seeing that it's developing, it can be really dangerous. That's why there's this coitus interruptus. We took the directors in and out when they fell in love because they started to shape their own film. Jennifer Fox never got out of South Africa because she refused to leave. She ended up finishing the film she should have been mentoring. It was a terrible experience because Jennifer Fox is a passionate filmmaker. She's a fantastic teacher, a fantastic mentor, but let's say she crossed the border. That's my opinion, and I can say it openly. I've said it to her also. She fell so deeply in love that she couldn't remove herself from the film.

When you try to see the film, when you go into people's minds, it's a question of listening, of course. It's a question of questioning and of trying to find out. So what kinds of questions do you ask? One is how are you capable of seeing what she is really doing, not what she is conceptually building for you as a reflection or presentation or representation of her idea about the film? I call it making a film as an obstacle to making the film. It's the same when we read.

When we come to these financing forums, we read what people have written, and perhaps we look at a trailer, and a common discussion is: There are not very interesting proposals this year at all. When the presentation and discussion have happened, people say: It's a fantastic project. So what's happening? Is it that the filmmaker's personal presentation is opening the doors for people to see the film? Or is it the one-to-one discussions? Yes, but also, it's very often the case that we cannot see the films based on the treatments we read. We see the written concept of the film, and it's almost like the filmmaker is a prisoner of what he has read, how the script or treatment or synopsis should be written. That all the rules of filmmaking are fulfilled in one way.

Very often I ask people not to tell me about the film or about its story. Just tell me what is going on. I just was at a workshop in Tokyo and met with a fantastic filmmaker. Her writing was totally conceptual. And when she was presenting it to me, I asked her to tell me the story. She started to tell the story of the film like she thought the story of the film should be. After one minute I said, "This is so boring. How do you tell your neighbour what you are doing? Have you told this in the same way to your neighbour and your mother?" And she replied, "Of course not!" "Of course not? Then what did you tell them?" And then she told the whole story of the film like this [snaps fingers], just like she would tell her mother or her neighbour, instead of building this concept of the film to me. And in this telling you often have 1) the motivation why she is making the film and 2) the information which is part of the film, 3) the situation where the film takes place, 4) the back story of the whole film. Whereas when she tells the story to her neighbours or to her mother, she tells them only the film.

This is something when you are questioning or listening, you can try to lead the director to tell the film in a way *that you see the film*. Like in workshops, when someone is talking about their film, I often ask the others: Do you see the film? If you say this is really interesting, and in your country there are the same types of problems with alcohol, bullshit. The question is: Do you see the film?

What kind of question helps to see the film when you are listening to just the proposal of the project? One is: What is the universal level of the film?

I often say: Here are things which are common to everybody in the world. The same emotions. We have the same emotions everywhere in the world. And we even recognize them. We have some of the same experiences. Everyone in the world has the same experiences. And we have some common values, which are – at the most abstract level – the same for everybody, even for the banker and the bank robber. At the most abstract level, they have the same values as to what is right and what is wrong. So try to find by your questions this level of universalism.

And then another level of the individual. Where are the conflicts? Where is the dilemma? What is the action? What is the choice? These four things are in every drama: dilemma, conflict, action, choice. Where are these four things reflected the most? Try to even forget if this film is taking place in Bolivia or in Finland or in India or wherever. Ask the filmmaker what it would be like if the same story were told in South Africa. (It doesn't mean that there aren't films which are totally made for one country only. That's okay. That's a different story.)

Next you can ask some very simple things: What is the timeline of the film? I try to find when the film starts even if the whole film is the backstory. Of course, I'm not champion to this. In my own mind, I try to find out what portion the backstory has in the film, and where the director is thinking of placing the backstory. Our linear time thinking is very often that the backstory is in the beginning of the film, which is a so-called killer for the film. You have a backstory, then it takes ten minutes for the film to start. So you just ask: When does the film start? At what moment? And then if you know when the film starts, you now have a beginning point and you can start to create a timeline.

Again, the timeline is not necessarily the narrative story timeline. I call it the emotional, tensional flow of the film. That the film has a tension which pushes it forward. It doesn't have to have a narrative structure to flow. It can be even tension between two different powers or forces which exist and constantly push the film forward. But something has to push it forward. Is it a motivation? A focus? Where the film starts? Three things that you start to know. These move the film forward. Where do you end up at the end? I don't need to know.

Enough of that. Very simple questions. I always ask the stupidest questions like: Are you going to use voice-over? Are you going to use interviews? What percentage is the archival footage? Is it ten percent or fifteen percent? Is the backstory this length or that length? It's very funny that we don't still draw the films. How much of the film will you shoot? For instance, you are flying to New York with your son. So if this is the 75 minutes, and you're saying that the backstory will come during the flight to New York, is New York here or here [shows different spots on the timeline]? Then she [the director] said: This one.

Then I start to see that flying to New York is almost like fifty-five minutes of the whole film. And here the reunion of the family is only twenty minutes. So I start to shape the film in my mind in a very simple way. Then I asked: Is there your voice-over? And she said: Yes. Ah, then there's her voice telling the story the whole time. Asking such stupid questions let's you know how the film will flow forward. Every case is different though.

JOHN WEBSTER [workshop participant] When you're talking about motivation, shaping the path, finding the film – in the case of Thomas [Balmès], I was a little bit intrigued by what gave you the sense that that's not the film that he really wants to make. What was it?

VEHKALATHI There's a funny one. The first proposals he made he said, "Let's direct this together." I don't think a filmmaker like Thomas Balmès would every want to make a film with somebody else.



So every proposal where he said, "likka, let's direct the film together," for me, it was a sign of: Let's work together. I need you. I want to communicate with you. I'm offering you to be the co-director. Let's do something together. I mean, it's a dream of many of us. Victor Kossakovsky even says, "Let's do something together." And he will never, never, never, never do anything except by himself because a director works by himself. I think so in this case of Thomas Balmès.

The second thing is that he was not yet mentally in the situation that he was free from his huge success of *Babies*. He made a film that made \$8 million in the United States, he got offered a \$4 million budget. And he was still hanging in the continuation of this: I have to make a big film again. So he was like a prisoner of the past and his reasoning was that he had to do a big film again. You did not really feel that this was something he wanted to make.

Thirdly, and this is very realistic, those of you who write know that you have three weeks to write, but nothing comes out and suddenly the deadline arrives. Then the last night the ideas come. So when Thomas Balmès' financial situation became so bad, you knew he had to do something. It's a very brutal way to know, but before he didn't have this pressure of having to do something. It's so simple. He was in a desperate situation. Then it's a question about the push. I can be a little bit effective at this, but then it's your producer or somebody who has to know that every time you say, "I'm doing this film," they have to say, "Yes, do it." But then you have to push him so he falls down and has to do the film. This is the producer or someone who has to give him this last push.

Okay, let's jump to the next one. I'm sorry that this part about trying to find the film was so short. It's not so easy at all trying to find the film. One way is to have one-to-one meetings with your director or mentor at a workshop or something. It's absolutely the best. Like I said, take your glasses off. With some people you build an absolutely strong emotional connection. Then when you are with one person only, and when you talk with him or her, and because documentary filmmaking is very much reflecting what kind of person someone is, then you don't necessarily need to read or research; you just look at them. You're trying to find their mind. When you really want to meet a person in these meetings, you take this obstacle of the conception of the film away. It's the same with the filmmaker. You try to build a connection. You really try to look at *who* she is. What are her hesitations? What are her strengths? What is she hiding? Is she powerful enough to do the film? What is really behind what she's saying? Does she trust me? Are we talking the same language? When I ask: Is your film going to be like this and this? does she react in a way that she doesn't accept? This kind of communication is not so much about the words, it's more the physical expression of another person. It means you are concentrating more on the other person. You're really trying to build the connection.

It's difficult. At the Forum [at IDFA], I really made a mistake with one filmmaker. I still don't know why. I said, "This is not interesting for the Finnish Broadcasting Company. I think you should think about how you're going to make your film because this way or that way are like two different films, so it would be good if you come back."

That's a normal discussion. But then if you continue and ask: "Do you really care about your mother because I don't feel for your mother here?" then it's something very personal. Then she said, "Perhaps that's my defence system." Then I said: "If it's your defence system, I should know that it's your defence system." Then after that, we didn't shake hands. She was totally hurt, and said, "You're a bastard. You behave so badly. You don't understand anything. I know these forums and these discussions have nothing to do with the filmmaking, you know the real filmmaking, when you really care about the people and you want to do something that's really important." She really wanted to make an important film. And when you touch something deep in her motivation and you question her honesty those moments you can hurt somebody badly. The filmmaker is really vulnerable and can become totally depressed.

For me, when I left filmmaking in Finland there was basically only one sentence in the Finnish Film Foundation that pushed me to that decision. I thought: Fuck. I will leave this and go away from Finland. I got the money. There was no question about this. I was praised and everything, but I'd had enough.

So when a filmmaker is so vulnerable, and when you try to read her mind, then you can also very easily harm her or hurt her because these are personal reactions. Even when they are filmmakers you are showing your rough cut to, these people have maybe been coming in and out for two years. They're in a hurry, fifteen minutes late, and just say, "Give me a coffee. Okay have you done your film? Let's look at it fast-forward. Come on." You've been working on it for two years and editing for six weeks, and you're just like "Ugh!" And then they come and behave like this, and look at the film and say, "Yes, it's wonderful, but can you do this and that?" And in your mind you would just say, "Leave!" because you cannot take it all in.

That's why I use a lot of writing, sending to the filmmaker different kinds of comments. With some filmmakers it works very well, with others not at all.

For instance, we've been working with John [Webster] a lot. John is absolutely professional, and we have a really good relationship. But I have never felt like I would be his producer or his mentor. I think we both enjoy working together but our mind sets are a little bit different. That's what I mean by matchmaking. With producers, directors and commissioning editors, it has nothing to do with whether someone is good or bad, but how they fit together. Some people fit better together than others.

One reason is when talking about this conceptual hindrance, this obstacle of the concept of the film, I feel that in Europe, where you have been really trained in these kinds of seminars, you already know everything. Rick [Minnich - participant in workshop], you know also that there are filmmakers where whatever you say they say, "I know. I know." Immediately they know what they mean. You understand? And it means that somehow it's no use discussing it.

ULLA SIMONEN [workshop tutor] But it sounds like you're talking about John now. [*Audience laughter*].

JOHN WEBSTER: May I join in this conversation about me?

VEHKALAHTI But John is a very good example because he knows filmmaking so well. He has been teaching it, he has been tutoring. He knows almost every proposal that we are doing beforehand. His mind has thought it through. So how can someone be a producer or tutor with John? Or with Pirjo Honkasalo? The only way I think you can be her mentor is if you send her to the most difficult place possible so she has to do something else than she's done before. That's the only thing I think you can do with Pirjo. Send her to Tokyo, and she comes back with the priest film [*Ito: A Diary of an Urban Priest*]. But that's another story.

JOHN WEBSTER Iikka, you did a fantastic mentoring for me at a very important part of my life. I made a film that was sort of fucked up from the beginning, and I spent forever on it – eight months of editing. I was in pieces and shattered. I'd totally lost all faith in filmmaking. And you said, "I've got this project in India. It's a twenty minute film. Why don't you go there?" And it turned out to be one of the best experiences of my life, and one of the best experiences of filmmaking as well. So that's a very important part of mentoring, too, to see where the filmmaker is, and to realize that that person needs help.

VEHKALAHTI That's really true. He was like that. [*laughter*] And then you have the money, and you have the contacts, and you can do something like that. But I think it's more like with *Recipes for*

*Disaster*: When you're looking at the film – and I was shown it's rough-cut and analysed it a few times, and it's a really great film – but why wasn't it possible to see what the problem was and that it actually should have been the total opposite way of what I had thought to solve that problem that's in the final film?

But in every case, personal discussion is great, but why I like to send written messages? You don't have to lose your face or show emotions. Also when the director is reading it, he or she can say, "That's amusing what he's proposing. Doesn't he understand anything?" When writing I start, "I know part of this is totally stupid, part of this will never function in the editing room – if it's a question about the rough cut – but just think about one thing: If somebody is reacting to something in your film and proposing something, you don't have to do what he or she is proposing, but you have to look at the reason why he or she is reacting. Because very often there's something wrong there. *So the proposer can be wrong, but the reason for the proposal could be something.*

On the plane today, just for fun, I was thinking about Nino Kirtadze, who made the film *Durakovo: Village of Fools*. There were lots of messages with that film I wrote then many of them started if I remember correctly: "You're a real filmmaker because of the access ... and because I like you so much, etc." So you write one page just building up the filmmaker.

AUDIENCE That's pure flattery that you're doing.

VEHKALAHTI No, this is different. Never lie because people immediately feel like you're trying to lick them. If you like somebody, say it. If you think she's a great filmmaker, say it. So actually you're not saying, "You're a bad filmmaker," or "Your material is good." Or if you can't say, "You're not a great filmmaker," you can say, "The characters that you have found are fantastic." If you don't find anything, then normally you wouldn't be writing. You would not be at this stage when you spend a lot of time writing. You've already decided to be her producer or whatever because she's such a good filmmaker that you want to spend your time with her. There's always something you can remind the person about.

This was a big lesson for me. Elina Katainen was my editor when I was a filmmaker. She was a really fantastic editor. When I took a look at the rough cut of the second film I was making, I said, "I don't like this one." And she burst out into tears for two hours. Why couldn't I first say, "You've done an incredible job putting all this material together. This is fantastic." Why didn't I say it like that first? Why didn't I first praise what she had done? I was really hurt last year at Tampere University, where we made with young students with €2000 50 minute doc for the 9 o'clock Saturday night theme evening. When we sent in the rough cut, my friend Sari Volanen commented, "The beginning doesn't really function." And I thought, "Shit! You could have just written first, "With €2.000 you have done a great job with your students." I felt insulted. Well, not insulted, but I really felt this was wrong. Why you should give some praise first.

Very often in mentoring, it's a little bit like a stick and a carrot. And on the different levels: You talk on a general level about the whole approach of the film, the tone and the style of the film, whatever. Then you can talk about the very small details.

I have just now one film: a nepalse called Gurkha. When the first two-and-a-half rough cuts came, I wrote, "Marvellous work. This is really going to be great. This is really fantastic." Then it's coming to a stage where after two other rough cuts I wrote last week, "This is unacceptable. I will never accept." So one month ago I said it's wonderful, it's a great film. And one month later, "It's unacceptable." *What is this?*

ULLA SIMONEN If a month ago you said it's wonderful, didn't you see the things that you're now saying are unacceptable? That's a rather quantum leap. If I were to get that kind of information that

first our rough cut is, let's say, rather lengthy, then you say, "Yes, it's cutting out fine." And then you says it's unacceptable, I would be wondering what the hell happened.

VEHKALAHTI Of course in between the filmmaker came to Finland for four days. After that it was wonderful. We went through the film for four days with another editor, and discussed it again and again. Then of course *he was seeing* the problems. But looking at the first rough cut, you have to support the potential of the film. When you have a two-and-a-half-hour rough cut, you don't look at that rough cut, but *at what can be shaped from that*. When you say it's great, this doesn't mean it's finished. You're writing that it will be a wonderful ninety or eighty-five minute film when it's still at two-and-a-half hours. So when you're saying that it's wonderful, you're saying that the potential of the film is wonderful.

ULLA SIMONEN But you know very well when the filmmaker hears it's wonderful, he's not hearing that the potential is wonderful. He's hearing: "It is wonderful." Besides this, I've been to so many of these screenings with you which you hated all along I hear now. *[audience laughter]* I've heard you say do different things. So I'm just trying to figure out what you actually said in the first place, and what you said last because you never say this is wonderful and then say it's unacceptable.

VEHKALAHTI No. It's never like this. Actually, you say, "It's wonderful work that you have done. This is going to be a wonderful ninety-minute film. You have two-and-a-half hours now. So it means it's a long way to go." But they have done something from the material of the previous rough cut. They have taken a marvellous step forward. But how do you support people in what they're doing at certain moments, and then at other moments say it's not enough or that they have to change something or do something radical? When you have almost given them a chance to go down that road as long as they can, but it's not enough and you need to say this?

It's coming almost like the bull fight in Hemingway's 5 o'clock In the afternoon.. It's the moment of truth. You're supporting, you're supporting, you're supporting, but then comes a certain time when you have to be capable of saying, "No, this doesn't function." It is also to take the road to the very end. Because in so many cases the films are delivered when they are not yet ready; when there is no more energy or eagerness to work with the film. Then you need a stick, THIS CHAPTER HAS BEEN MOVED FROM THE PREVIOUS CHAPTER.

When looking at rough cuts it's very good to listen to what they're saying at the same time. Because when you hear what they say, it's very often that you realise either what is missing in the material or *there is* something that the filmmaker feels is even more important than what you see in the material.

It's very often good to know what really happened. Like you know, the filmmaker is carrying everything, all his experiences with him. So when he looks at the rough cut, it's not what you're seeing, but also what's in the filmmaker's mind. So how can you help the filmmaker understand that you see only this, and whatever he is adding there, for example orally, is not in the film? It has to be there if it's so important, so how do you place it there because it's not there? Or the filmmaker is telling a different story than what he's showing you. Sometimes I ask: "Can you tell me what really happened because it's different than what I see edited here?"

For example, Fukushima in Japan. It destroyed a twenty kilometre circle. You see in the beginning of the film that the stables have all been ruined. All these buildings are destroyed. The horses are left there, but the people have had to leave. Then after two or three weeks, the people can return to their homes. So we can see the protagonist going back to this area near Fukushima. We see him driving. We see the houses waiting for them to come. And the next shot is the man standing in the ruins of the stables. Three shots of him looking at these, then he goes to his home. Everybody was

saying something was wrong with this. It didn't function, but nobody knew why. So the question for the filmmaker was: What really happened? He said in the real life the man went first home, then he went to see the stables. But the filmmaker had put the ruins of the stables first because he was making a film about the destiny of the horses in Fukushima as a symbol of disaster. And actually when he was embellishing what happened in reality, it just didn't function. It's often like this. If you ask the filmmaker what really happened, he tells another story than what he's inventing for the film because he's a prisoner of the concept of making the film instead of telling the story.

I have tried to be smart today and behave really professionally, but it's not like that at all in real life. People here who know me know a lot is missing. But if you're a producer or a mentor, especially a mentor, it's really important for you to be childish and stupid enough to help the filmmaker. You don't have to be wiser or a better filmmaker or clever. You don't have to be the one who is saving the film. It's total bullshit to tell them how to make the film. Of course, a lot of the time I'd like to do that, and in my soul I think I did it. But if you are a really good mentor, you are so stupid and you ask your stupid questions and make your mistakes and propose the wrong things and you behave even badly. But you know you cannot force the filmmaker to make the film you want them to make.

JOHN WEBSTER There was something you talked about in the beginning about how filmmakers are not actually good mentors. This was something we talked about today, about letting go of the ego. You could say the same about commissioning editors, too.

VEHKALAHTI Yes, absolutely.

JOHN WEBSTER If they can't let go of their egos, then they won't be good. It's a skill.

ULLA SIMONEN But he also said that good filmmakers don't necessarily make mentors. *likka* is also a filmmaker, so of course this leads to your question. [*audience laughter*]

VEHKALAHTI I'm not such a good filmmaker. No, but this letting go of the ego – for the Finnish, I even wrote about the power of the commissioning editors. You were mentioning the flattery, but how flattered commissioning editors, but also producers and mentors are because they have this taste of power. You've got this tiny bit of power. Commissioning editors are small things in the project, but how much we enjoy having that little bit of power.

KERSTIN DEGERMAN [Head of Media Desk Finland] This was something we talked to Ulla [Simonen] about while preparing for the Nordic Forum, which not all of you attended but perhaps some of you did. There was a guy from Danish radio, I think, I don't remember his name, who really used this power in not such a nice way by introducing the event by saying, "Don't be so fucking Finnish!" This wasn't so nice. And then it sort of stuck for the two days [of the Nordic Forum]. It's also a way of using this power and putting different countries in their place a little bit. You'd never say to them, "Don't be so fucking Danish!" for example.

JOHN WEBSTER Maybe we should. [*audience laughter*] *likka*, I think it also has to do with the power of a commissioning editor/mentor/professional supporter/coitus interruptus. Again, we were talking today about what to do with someone who doesn't want coitus. What can you do about this? I remember from STEPS, that I had two projects, and there was one filmmaker who absolutely didn't want any coitus at all. It got messy if you tried to force the coitus, to use your metaphor. [*audience laughter*]

VEHKALAHTI I'm not sure that using this coitus interruptus in the sense that you are saying is really opening. As I tried to say before, it's almost like matchmaking in that sense. There are some people that people like to work with, and they get a lot from them. And with some people it doesn't

work. And it doesn't necessarily have to do with who is the better mentor. I mean, look at couples. I often wonder how this woman ended up with this kind of man or the other way around. Have you ever wondered the same thing? There are very few couples where you'd like to invite both of them to your home. [audience laughter] It's the same with filmmaking, that somehow there's somebody where you wonder why, but that person just fits so well and something is there that works. I remember when I was a filmmaker that some of the stupid remarks – that's why I'm saying stupid, stupid – have been the best ones for my thinking, not the ones that make your film like this and this and this. They haven't helped me very much. But stupid remarks have made some things click into place.

ULLA SIMONEN I was just thinking about STEPS in South Africa. You did the same thing in *The Other Finland* in Finland, when you went around the country and had people come in and be thrown out again, to come for a brief moment to do something and then leave again. But there's also this use of power because it was not the mutual understanding between the filmmaker and the professional supporter who came in about how they would work together and when their work would be done. Rather it was someone else who placed that person there and then took them away.

VEHKALAHTI I know some people have asked this question. Theoretically you can select anybody in the world to work with them, but actually the filmmaker doesn't have any idea beyond maybe having seen one or two films from that person. So it is the use of power. The challenge when you're arranging this in a workshop or you have a mentor or someone is how to know when you're actually harming the film more than you're benefitting it, and how to solve that situation. If you have a co-producer who is pushing the film in the wrong direction or the commissioning editor is destroying the film, what do you do then?

AUDIENCE That's why the stupid questions are so important because they're the base for everything. The stupid questions are the why and the how and the what. And when you know the answers to those, then you know which direction you want to take. And when you have the certainty of that, then it's probably easier to spot those situations where it might be jeopardized by someone who is not the right critical connection. At least that's how I see it.

VEHKALAHTI No, I was just thinking glasses and tunnel vision. [audience laughter] Just how difficult it is. The sooner you discuss the big things about the film, but also the little things, the better it is. As a producer, you have to distance yourself from the film yet at the same time be really involved in it.

JOHN WEBSTER You didn't really answer the question that you asked yourself: What does one do then as a commissioning editor when you feel that you're driving the project in the wrong direction? If it's a co-production, and you're just one of the commissioning editors?

VEHKALAHTI I don't know how to do it. If there are several commissioning editors, then it's a power struggle. Actually I was just thinking how good it would be if someone said to me, "likka, don't continue because you are now giving me the wrong things. This is harming me." It's the same with the producer: "Just stop now. What you are now proposing to me is not good for me." I think it would be great if that kind of relationship existed. That would be really good. If the director said, "Just don't talk about this. I know what I'm doing."

AUDIENCE But it must be difficult because it's kind of a conflict of interest to be a mentor and a commissioning editor because you also have responsibilities toward somebody else.

JOHN WEBSTER You have your strand, your slot.

VEHKALAHTI Yes. But I have said in that case that everybody is in the cage. And if you accept that I'm working in this cage, then you spread the space as much as you can. If you are not satisfied with this state, then go away or start a revolution and revolt, as a commissioning editor, I mean. And I think that I have tried to make maximum use of this space that exists to support the art of documentary filmmaking in that given cage, and trying to keep the cage as big as it is. But, of course, it's two different things. I prefer perhaps the films that I would not commission.

MICHAEL SEEBER [workshop tutor] I know very few cases in which a commissioning editor or a producer is really able to be a mentor for a film project. That's why the commissioning editor and the producer have so much power. The commissioning editor, as well as the producer, wants to get something. That's their job. And it's often the case that the commissioning editor and the producer have such strong characters that they are not able to forget they have that power. They're not able to change their roles or switch into another role. This doesn't happen very often.

VEHKALAHTI I think that the producer should be capable of doing that.

SEEBER Yes, he or she should. But it's not very often the case.

VEHKALAHTI For example, I have solved this dilemma. I don't much like forums, but I have to be at them because of obligations. But I try to keep myself alive lecturing and working with the filmmakers, when I'm not actually a prisoner of the regulations of commissioning the films.

ANNA LAURILA [workshop participant from Film Arc, Finland] I have the pleasure of working with filmmakers when they don't have a producer or commissioning editor attached yet, so I'm sort of the first contact. They come with fairly blurry ideas, and I try to figure out who this filmmaker is and what this project is all about. This one filmmaker that I had had already made some films. I thought she had a really good idea, and I said, "Wow, this is going to be a wonderful film. But the idea needs to be developed, and there must be a producer." So I suggested they take the project to a producer I know, who makes wonderful films. Then the producer and I agreed to send the filmmaker to a workshop where she could develop and strengthen the idea.

She went through this training programme, and the end result was that everything went wrong. Really everything. Everything that could go wrong went really wrong. She got completely lost in space. She got so many different kinds of feedback that conflicted with what she originally wanted to do. And the producer had a completely different idea. In the end, I managed to fuck up the whole process because she lost interest. She was in development for I think one-and-a-half years. Then she came back to me and said, "You know what? I give up." I felt so miserable because everything was good in theory, but not in practice. It really killed me, and I feel terrible about it. I think it would have been a really strong film. So I said, "I'm sorry this happened. But hopefully you will go on to do some other stuff." But on the other hand, she came back a couple of years later and said that that was actually a good thing to do and that she learned a lot even though she was in pieces after the process was over. But it is a tricky thing to bring expertise after expertise and not trust that [the original idea]. She really wanted to work with me originally, and I told her I didn't have the time. So I put her into these courses.

VEHKALAHTI It's difficult if you have to go from one expert to another on your own. That's why you need somebody who is with you all the time and supporting you.

ROLF ORTHEL: Thanks so much for the wonderful lecture.

APPLAUSE