

## Tue Steen Müller

### Mentoring in Documentary Filmmaking

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The other day I was talking to some old school mates from the high school. Of course the talk was also about the teachers we had. The terrible ones, the good ones, those we remember as the ones, who gave us something we could be inspired by. Without thinking about it my Danish teacher planted a seed in me, the interest in Eastern Europe and Russia. To avoid the Danish lessons we always tried to make him talk about his Russian background... He loved it, he was passionate in his speeches about St. Petersburg (at that time Leningrad), anecdotes, literature, Dostojevski and Pushkin...

Could one call him a mentor?



Anyway, I have just been to Riga for a workshop and pitching session of documentaries. Baltic Sea Docs, it is called. Here one of those pitching was Tatyana Soboleva, Russian documentary filmmaker.

I met her in St. Petersburg in 2011 and since then we have been in contact through FB, emails and at documentary events around Europe. In Pieter we arranged a seminar of two days for Russian filmmakers who came, knew almost nothing about how to present, about the European market,

where to go and what to do. It was a discovery of talent. Tatyana was one of them. When I asked her if I could “use” her here as an example, she gave me this compliment “you push(ed) me to develop everything including languages”.

What I also said to her and the other participants in the seminar at the Danish Cultural Institute was something like “... you have talent in filmmaking but if you want to get into the international documentary circles, you MUST learn English”.

She did, she pitched in Riga in (almost) perfect English, she had a trailer, she knew and had been trained in how to pitch.

But what I am more proud of having pushed her gently to - is to find her FILM language. She is not a Kossakovsky, she works mostly alone, doing the camera herself, and she is not one of the many, who explicitly criticizes Putin and his regime. Others do that, there were many in Riga.

Let me show you some trailers from her work: *Siberian Floating Hospital*, *The Other Side of the Horse*, *Uncle Sasha*, *The Russian Way*

I have seen rough cuts of the first and advised her to stay with her own vision and not try to adapt to television standards in the West – faster editing etc. So in terms of mentoring I have been the fresh eyes from outside, who has nothing at stake like being involved money-wise or being working for a tv station etc. An independent view in other words.

So a bit more about myself:

In every international film event I have taken part in during the last 25 years, I have always started by saying that I am not a filmmaker so if you want to listen to me, you will get words from someone, who has not directed, written scripts or edited any documentaries, the genre that has been my “destiny” since I started in the Danish Film Board in 1975. What I have learned about documentaries, I learned there through watching, listening, asking questions, sitting in editing rooms.

I was at the Film Board for 20 years, a public institution with at some point around 100 people employed, focused on short and documentary films, non-theatrical distribution, like the sister organization in Canada, National Film Board of Canada. I was doing press work, festivals, distribution (I have been through the period of 16mm, VHS cassettes, dvd’s and vod’s) and commissioning.

In Denmark we call c-editors consultants, i.e. persons who are responsible for the artistic evaluation of film projects. I was one for 8 years, first in the framework of a program committee, later – as it is today where the Film Board is part of the Danish Film Institute – as one of two consultants, who take the decisions.

I will come back to what I experienced as consultant in connection with the relations to applying filmmakers. I would not call that mentoring.

So mentoring... what is it?

I had never really thought about the true meaning of the word before you asked me to come here and talk about it.

I consulted some clever people and asked them “what is a mentor”.

Robert Fausto, who is a scientist, a glaciologist, told me that in his world a mentor is someone, who is INDEPENDENT and thus not involved in any project funding or development towards a result – easy to translate into the film world. Key word: INDEPENDENT.

Allan Berg, who is my co-editor on the blog, that we have been running for the last decade ([www.filmkommentaren.dk](http://www.filmkommentaren.dk)), and who I consider to be one of my mentors, said that the word goes back to the old Rome, where the experienced and wise older people took the young ones under their wings. WISDOM and EXPERIENCE are the key words.

Niels Pagh Andersen, who has edited some of the documentary highlights from the last years, *Act of Killing*, *Look of Silence*, *Human Acale* by Ai WeiWei, and many others said this to me:

I had a mentor myself. Christian Hartkopp was his name. I did not go to any film school but was invited by this star editor from my country to sit with him at the editing table. As I am now a mentor myself, actually I think I owe *my* mentor to do something, to pass on knowledge and experience. For me mentorship is something unauthorized, not institutionalized, personal. You discover a talent, you feel that you can help – someone who wants to establish a trustful relationship. Key words: NOT INSTITUTIONALIZED. PERSONAL are the key words.

Producer Lise Lense-Møller said to me once: There is nothing better than helping other people. I agree to that.

What can I take from this: to be a good mentor, you have to know the person and his/her works, you have to create a good chemistry between you, he/she has to know you, what you stand for – I could never help someone with a journalistic investigative documentary or a scientific. I have been brought up with the understanding that a documentary is a Film, in modern EU-language I am in that category that is called “creative documentary”.

A mentor for me, after having made many mistakes, also as consultant – c-editor – or teacher at a film school or tutor at a workshop... a mentor is someone, who does not tell people directly, what to do but tries to understand what a filmmaker wants, often contrary to a tutor who wants to check or formulate what he/she thinks, or a film consultant, who works within a fixed framework.

Just a bit more biography: After the Film Board I was from 1996 to 2005 director of EDN – European Documentary Network. Great job, that I have profited from since 2005 because of the network, the many people I met and still have contact to. So I am teaching at film schools, I am involved in pitching workshops, I am programming at a couple of festivals, DocsBarcelona and Magnificent7 in Belgrade – and maybe most important today: I am an independent, wise and experienced, a free bird, and old fart, who gives advice/coach for free!

Time for you, and myself to see if I live up to this:

Let me give you another example:

I have been a mentor for Giedre Zickyte, filmmaker from Lithuania. She is 38 years old, graduated from the journalism program at Vilnius University, completed a post-graduate course in TV and film directing at the Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre, and acquired a master's degree in photography and media arts at the Vilnius Academy of Arts.

I have met her in Vilnius during workshops and in Riga, where the Baltic Sea Forum, pitching and project development for a small week, is taking place. And around Europe, she's been everywhere wanting to learn and do networking, find funding, she is quite a handful...

Giedre comes from journalism and is one of the many I have met during the years, who was fed up with the quick and superficial news to be conveyed first and foremost via television.

I want to make documentaries, she said to me... also for an international market.

All right, I could have said, do you know what a documentary is, have you seen a lot? She had, she comes from a country with a long tradition for documentaries, the generations before her created the so-called poetic school of documentaries, so it was another kind of mentoring she needed.

For the last 10 years I have been in contact with Giedre. I have read project descriptions, watched trailers, watched rough cuts, advised her on festivals, hundreds of emails between us.

The first example, from 2011, is the film *How We played the Revolution*, which reflects the history of the country at the time of the change. From Soviet Lithuania to a free country.

My humble mentor role with that film was to tell her what I did not understand, what was too "internal" Lithuanian, what she could change to make the film more accessible for an international audience. This was her first longer documentary so some hints on storytelling was needed. Again I stressed that I am not an editor but I could see where the film went "dead". You have to clarify your position up front.

I was much more involved in the next film *Master and Tatyana*, that was also at Sources 2 with David Wingate as tutor.

Involved in the way that she made me watch I don't know how many versions of the film. To hear my opinions, which I gave in the way that I told her, what I liked in the film and what I disliked. I got to understand and respect the amazing research she had done in the life of Luckus, her way of dealing with Tatyana, living in America, creating a trustful relationship to her – a classical dilemma for a young director, who has been working on her film for years, drowning in details. Her passion was enormous, she had fallen in love with the dead photographer and wanted him to be world famous. Simply!

My role as a friend and consoler in times of depression was to say "focus", what is important, kill your darlings, find the story, and she did, or she had it, the focus, but it was not clear enough: this is a love story, this is a fantastic photographer and his wife/muse... It was a very emotional journey for Giedre, and hard for her producer and her editor, Danielus Kokanauskis, who is a capacity, who edits all films for Sergey Loznitsa. She continued and continued, editing herself. I remember being at a rough cut screening, where Giedre had huge difficulties in accepting the criticism/suggestions from the producer Dagne Vildziunaite, the editor and me. One of those moments where I felt that we - including me – went too far. There is a lot of psychology, "Fingerspitzengefühl" needed, I learned. We overwhelmed her that afternoon.

It is so important to think about, who to invite for rough cut sessions, you have to be very picky and careful to avoid the feeling of being at an examination at school.

And I think Giedre learned a lot from this experience which was painful but with a fine end result, a great film that has toured festivals all over.

And now a new film is coming up, *The Jump*, where I helped her edit her verbal pitch for IDFA 2016, where I have seen several rough cuts, where she has had several editors help her, where she has started her own company, Moonmakers, and has become a producer for a new talent. The relay is being passed on...

She calls me her “documentary guru”, very flattering...

What I learned from the experience with Giedre:

When you watch rough cuts, do not go into details. Listen, try to understand what the dilemma(s) are for the director. Don't pay attention to his/her problems with the editor and/or producer, don't try to solve any of these. Establish what you have of psychological sense and be positive and talk about the main matters. Pay respect!

And when a filmmaker says yes, but he/she says something else, a c. editor/consultant, fellow filmmaker – say all right but I am only here to say what I think. I trust you, please trust me. I am here to help you to make your film, not my film.

The personal contact is important. Most of the time, when I give feedback on rough cuts it is in a written form, but, depending on how well you know the person, skype conversations are better.

Have to confess that I far too often have said yes to view a rough cut from someone, I have met briefly, and then I see it and it is far away from me.

Learn to say no!

Some words about being a film consultant:

Times have changed at the Danish Film Institute – in my time, last period 1992-96, there were no application schemes to be filled in by the applicants, filmmakers could come and talk, have discussions, and I could give suggestions for film subjects that I thought would be good for that specific director. I could challenge them – I think you should make this film.

Like Lars von Trier does when he asks Jørgen Leth re-make *The Perfect Human*, but with some obstacles.

Risky business of course but I truly believe that good films were made on the basis of meetings and some writings.

Having said so, I have often said that there is two ways of documentary writing: Writing for the film and writing for the money, for funding. I believe in diversity – some films have been made on the basis of the mentioned meetings/dialogues, often many, often also with suggestions from the consultant, like maybe it will be good for the process to go home and write it all down, like a letter or like an essay.

All that is the starting points, again it's about understanding to whom you are talking, knowing his/her previous work, saying “see films, read books, travel, be interested in visual art”.

The rough cut sessions are basically the same as if you were there as a mentor but of course it is different as there are deadlines and money, and in many cases “doctors disagree” – if a television representative is there and a film consultant, there can be different wishes. It most often ends up in different versions – durations.

What I loved mostly during my time as consultant, was when I was drawn into the process, was being asked for advice, there is always crisis in the making of a film, hopefully you can help. Always try to be on the director's side, the creative side.

Tutoring at workshops that end up in pitching to a panel of broadcasters or sales agents is a totally

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different ballgame. A written catalogue with all necessary info is available up front, your job is to make the pitchers make an understandable and passionate verbal pitch, often in a language that is not their first language. It's a very practical result-orientated piece of work but it is also a work where you have to ask questions again and again in order to make the pitchers understand their own film project. Let me give the obvious example that comes back again and again – filmmakers hesitate to say that it is a personal story, that it is something close to themselves. That's a tutor's job to get it out of them.

There is only one way – asking questions all the way, what is it you want to say and HOW.

Teaching at film school – it's young people, you have to get to know them, why did they choose film school, why documentaries, they are young, they have not seen so many people, and films, teach them, show them that there are other directors than Werner Herzog! Tell them about the variety of sub-genres there are within the documentary sector.

Again psychology – how close can you go in personal matters. I remember a student at Zelig, who said to me "I don't like myself". Hmm, what does the teacher do in that case. I tried to tell him what was good at his upcoming graduation film, which actually ended up in being a festival hit.

I have got many compliments in my mentoring, tutoring, teaching jobs – the best one is still:

"You Care".