

## Documentary film as a backdrop for active thinking

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Film Still: View of London City. © Ana Berkenhoff and Ethan Folk

This chapter is about a short film and some thoughts relating to it. The film is *Cormorant*. It is by Ana Berkenhoff and Ethan Folk and its running time is 7' 33". It was shot in the City of London and looks for an interaction between a documentary setting and an artistic approach, a conversation between imagination and reality. The film focuses on the thoughts of pleasure and interruption when confronted with the everyday life of the City. *Cormorant* is a movement and perspective study that questions the life of human beings in their financial centres. The body is placed like an unusual object in everyday places. The dance is the city life that exists around us.

#### A Note on Screenings

*Cormorant* debuted at *Unit 61: Movable hosts* in London, April 2015 and was shown as part of the official selection for *Festival Internacional de Videodanza de Chile* (sociedad contemporanea), November, 2015. Official selection at *Plano Lisboa*, Alternative Worlds programme, Lisbon, 2015. Official selection at *Premios Latino del Cine e Musica*, Marbella, May, 2016

*Sound & Music in Documentary Film Symposium Huddersfield*, February 2017. *Konzert der Generationen, Evimus*, 4 Saarbrücker Tage für elektro-akustische und visuelle Musik, Saarbrücken, November 2017.

### The Making of *Cormorant*

The film was shot in one day and finished in three. The consecutive filming, and the direct recording and composing of the voice-over and music, helped to create both the specification and the magic invoked by the film. It is a collaboration between a first time visitor to London (Ethan Folk) and a resident (Ana Berkenhoff). We decided that we would shoot at a few specific places in London that take me aback or that I find striking. These include Richard Rogers' Lloyd's building, the glass elevator of the Heron tower, a square hole in a building site, the birch trees in front of the Tate Modern, and the view from a tower which served as artist studios in Hackney but is now empty as a result of gentrification. We were looking for places that mirror feelings of claustrophobia, endlessness and isolation and emphasize our role as observers. We wanted to document these places and our reactions towards them.

The film starts in silence. People are looking up towards something, clapping their hands. Then the music starts. The camera is running down from the open sky, along a building, into a street in the City of London. A voice is talking from outside the picture. You see people dressed for business, typical red double-decker buses, the life on the street: a simple urban reality. In opposition to the business life, one performer places herself in unusual places, silently looking straight into the camera. The picture of dramatic clouds above the skyline keeps reappearing during the film. The floating camera creates a sense of ease in the spectator. The voice reflects on the environment, offering audible guidance as well as points of confusion throughout the film.

I was inspired by the approach to performing and speaking in the film *Wings of Desire*, made in 1987 as a collaboration between the director Wim Wenders and the authors Peter Handke and Richard Reitinger. The original title was *Der Himmel über Berlin* (*The Heavens Over Berlin*). Two male angels observe people in Berlin, their isolation and hopes. They are visible and their thoughts are audible, they even communicate through thinking. I wanted to make a simple experiment with documentary filming and a sound and voice added from outside. I am experienced at working in public spaces, choreographing people without them knowing it, and combining fiction within documentary filming. The approach to voice in *Wings of Desire* made me curious as to how the technique could be expanded. I was looking for pictures that were as simple as possible and a voice sounding as personal as possible. No fiction, only the added music as a carrier of emotional possibilities. Can the simple friction created by the co-existence of performers and non-performers form a base with which to stimulate the audience's imagination?

Wenders: 'And that's really the only thing I have to say about stories: they are one huge, impossible paradox! I totally reject stories, because for me they only bring out lies, nothing but lies, and the biggest lie is that they show coherence where there is none. Then again, our need for these lies is so consuming that it's completely pointless to fight them and to put together a sequence of images without a story — without the lie of a story. Stories are impossible, but it's impossible to live without them' (Wenders 1988/1991).

*Cormorant* was made in a constant dialogue between the two artists, sharing observations and interviewing each other. This produced the voice-over. Although filming in a documentary style means that many things can't be planned, a big advantage is the resulting flexibility that allows you to focus on your intention. Not taking sound on scene made a small mobile team possible. Shooting in a public space without being recognized as a film crew was crucial. The mode of observation in *Wings of Desire* led me to the idea of confronting documentary scenes and non-performing people with the still and direct gaze of a performer, looking directly into the camera. The intention was to create a kind of feedback-loop of gazes and thoughts that become vivid in the viewer: documentary film as a backdrop for active thinking.

I focused on the fluidity of the process, especially using the shift between documentary and storytelling in the use of sound and voice. I did not want to implement a view, but to open a timeframe (the film) for many personal views. Documentary film uses the art of storytelling. It is never the pure documentation of a reality because it is always involves choice, an excerpt of reality. But it tends to work from a particular stance, one that does not draw the audience in but privileges the observing position.

Being a performer in the midst of non-performers can produce interesting tensions in a picture, even without anything happening. It can also be a means to emphasize the relationship with the people around. I use reality in film to show the open gap between real life and fiction, seen through a lens. Reality is the place where you start to develop a fantasy, a utopia, a question. I want to open the space of questioning for the audience and give back possibilities. Experiencing the strange, uninviting space of a financial city centre called us to action. The City of London is a place where people work, represent work and seem isolated. What has led to the people's isolation? Martin Heidegger writes in his essay 'What Are Poets For?' (1971) that living merely as a productive consciousness establishes life on goal-oriented strategies. This leaves the subject feeling fragmented from those around him and thus suspended over an abyss where little meaning remains: 'What threatens man in his very nature is . . . the

uniformity of production, . . . [which] from the outset destroys the realm from which any rank and recognition could possibly arise' (Heidegger, 1971).

When watching and directing films I prefer an independent sound. I like the clash of the dramatic and everyday life. In *Cormorant* I used non-diegetic sound, sound whose source is neither visible on the screen, nor has been implied to be present in the action. There is a very slow time flow in the music, while the pictures are (apart from the time-lapse in the clouds) at their original speed. The sound is a long continuous, sometimes wavering, tone, the heartbeat of a city. You can hear many overtones, slowly developing over the length of the film. The slow-moving music focuses the view on the pictures and their content. The music ebbs and flows and swells with little development over time, it adds breath and life. The sound, image and voice differ, constantly shifting the perception from inside the picture to the outside. It questions whether the picture and words correlate.

The speaker's voice is husky, with an accent, sometimes close to breaking. She voices a stream-of-consciousness poem, describing for example a bush, a human, a future. The voice goes beyond the scene, connecting to the moment the film was shot. Her words connect to the feelings and relationship the authors experienced towards the film. As a documentary, the sound takes a rather classical approach in creating



Film Still: Thinking. © Ana Berkenhoff and Ethan Folk

tension and expectations (ones that will not be met). The calm pictures of the cityscape provide a counterpoint to the slight weirdness of the voice.

The music is continuous and establishes a flow: a visual, acoustic and sensorial environment that implements a varying imagetic dramaturgy. Although the film is open to the viewer's interpretation in its structure, the voice offers an imaginative world of thought that actively engages the listener leading towards an interpretation.

Wenders: 'Images are acutely sensitive; like snails they shrink back when you touch their horns. They don't have it in them to be carthorses: carrying and transporting messages or significance or intention or a moral. But that's precisely what a story wants from them' (Wenders, 1988/1991).

The voice, with its ambiguity, its secrets and suggestions as to what the film and the sound could be about, says:

*While you thought that it has this form and it's concrete and it's there and it's the truth, suddenly it can move. We can't control it. Every sound you hear, that sound, the other one is a mixture of all the sounds. It's laughter and crying and screaming and silence, all at once.*

It is just a *draft* of being. The subject is immediately drawn into larger connections than it existed in before. Is this the space of the heart or the interior space of the productive consciousness? For Heidegger, who thinks about what good poets are for, the space of the heart is 'beyond the arithmetic of calculation' and can 'overflow into the unbounded whole of the Open' This 'open' is what I aim for in my music and in the mix of available filmic tools. Without big effects in picture and sound, the mere combination can have enough friction to make a call to action on the most profound level.

Ekphrasis is a Greek concept, a skill that enabled the audience to visualise scenes, places and historical events, it was a strategy for constructing speeches that would suggest, establish, and awaken images 'before the very eyes' of the audience. Ekphrasis leads us to a dynamic and complex play between the presence and absence of for example a bush, an animal, an idea.

Enargeia, the quality that makes an ekphrasis and distinguishes it from a plain report of the facts, is a paradoxical phenomenon. It is able to arouse emotions through immaterial semblances of scenes that are not present to the listener and may never take place. For what lies behind vivid speech, is the gallery of mental images, impressed by sensations in the speaker's mind.

The ability to signify absence in presence allows the artist to call new realms of meaning into existence, creating new worlds that call the dominance of the present

life into question. What can make us attempt to see our situation more clearly? Can we attempt to become aware of *options* rather than *solutions* in a traditional sense?

Always trying to be crystalline with a desire to engage in a possible transformation, and not be static. Always being in a state of genesis or development, of de-centring and re-centring the senses, with a willingness to reach out of the film and enter the dialogue with the world. Wenders: 'I prefer movies that ask me to see' (Wenders 1988/1991). This voice says:

'Listen!'

'This must be the other side.'

'I see, I see, now I know where we are, we are in that kind of space!'

The music stays, even after the last image.

### Suggested viewing, reading and listening

*Cormorant* is available at <https://anaberkenhoff.com/cormorant/>

Peter Handke's radio play *Hörspiel Nr.2* which takes place in the streets of Berlin where taxi drivers form a group of actors meandering through the city.

The work of Roland Barthes. *S/Z: An essay* is a useful reference for processes involving agency and interaction.



Film Still: Helicopters over the City. © Ana Berkenhoff and Ethan Folk

*The transformative power of performance: a new aesthetics* by Erika Fischer-Lichte is a useful reference for sound, rhythm, atmospheres and meanings in performance

All pictures are from the film *Cormorant* by Ana Berkenhoff & Ethan Folk

**Ethan Folk** is a Berlin-based artist, filmmaker and fisherman from Seattle/ Canada. He has exhibited in Canada, Italy, Spain and wider Europe and is engaged in several artist collectives. His latest work *Vernae* is an experimental dance film based on *The Rite of Spring*, Igor Stravinsky's masterpiece of 1913, which has gained much attention because of its unconventional approach to dance, landscape and ritual.



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Film Still: People Clapping. © Ana Berkenhoff and Ethan Folk