

INTERVIEW WITH MIA ENGBERG



WINNER OF THE 2019 AUDENTIA
AWARD FOR “LUCKY ONE”

AUGUST 2019

BY KARIN SCHIEFER

LET'S IMAGINE A SCREENING OF “LUCKY ONE” IN A THEATRE: THE SPECTATOR IS SITTING IN A DARK ROOM AND IS INTRODUCED TO YOUR STORY BY MEANS OF A BLACK SCREEN. “LUCKY ONE” BEGINS WITH A TEXT AS VOICE-OVER, AND THE STORY ITSELF ONLY BEGINS TO TAKE SHAPE IN OUR MINDS AND IMAGINATION. I'D SAY IT'S A SORT OF LITERARY ACCESS TO A CINEMATIC STORY. WHAT WERE THE THOUGHTS THAT PROMPTED YOU TO ADOPT THIS MULTILAYERED FORM OF STORYTELLING?

I am interested in cinema as an art form. However these days most cinema is made within the entertainment industry. The spectator is supposed to be fed with stereotypes of characters and a flow of images. I started to make films 25 years ago. At that time film was considered something big, something that could definitely change your life. Now we are overstimulated by such a huge quantity of moving images that the audience sometimes almost becomes numb. I notice increasing violence and also an increasing volume level for the soundtrack. In my filmmaking I wish to create a different relationship between my work and the spectator. I want the dark room of the cinema to liberate the audience from this passive position, allowing people to create their own images inside them-

selves, as we're used to doing with literature or music. In my films there is enough space for you to insert your own images. A film of mine can become a hundred different films, depending on who is watching it.

AT THE START OF “LUCKY ONE” THE VIEWER IS CONFRONTED BY SWEDISH, FRENCH, UKRAINIAN AND ITALIAN. IT IS PRETTY DESTABILISING TO BE SENT IN SO MANY DIFFERENT DIRECTIONS. BUT AS THE FILM MOVES AHEAD, THE LANGUAGE, WHICH SEEMED TO BE A CONFUSING ELEMENT AT THE BEGINNING, BECOMES THE GUIDING FORCE. THERE'S ONE LANGUAGE LINKED TO MEMORIES, ANOTHER TO THE PRESENT. IS LANGUAGE IN GENERAL THE DETERMINING FACTOR IN YOUR FILMMAKING?

No, I wouldn't say that. My previous film, “Belleville Baby”, is only in French and Swedish, and as far as I remember the previous films only featured one language depending whether I made them in the USA, France or Sweden. In “Lucky One” I wanted to challenge not only the spectator but also the conventions of cinematic language to find out how far I could go and still maintain momentum in a story that can be followed. I didn't want to use very many images; I wanted it to be rich in another way – so that every



"Lucky One"

language has its own colour – and I wanted to apply this pattern with different languages. As a Swede I'm very accustomed to watching films with subtitles. For someone who doesn't know any of the languages used in my film, it's certainly more challenging.

WE CAN HEAR YOUR OWN VOICE SPEAKING SWEDISH AND FRENCH ON THE PHONE WITH VINCENT, YOUR MALE PROTAGONIST IN THE ROLE OF YOUR FORMER BOYFRIEND. ARE THERE CERTAIN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ELEMENTS IN THE STORY?

I'm working on a trilogy. The first film, "Belleville Baby", is about me and Vincent, who actually used to be my boyfriend when we were young. I'd say that first part is more of a poetic documentary. You don't have to know that to watch "Lucky One". "Belleville Baby" is somehow based on reality, while "Lucky One" is much more of a fiction.

YOU'RE PLAYING A DOUBLE ROLE: ON THE ONE HAND YOU'RE MIA THE PRIVATE PERSON AND VINCENT'S FORMER GIRLFRIEND, WHILE ON THE OTHER HAND YOU ACT THE PART OF A FILMMAKER WHO STILL WANTS TO FIND AN APPROPRIATE RESOLUTION TO THE STORY. THIS MEANS THERE'S ALSO A FILM WITHIN THE FILM ABOUT FILMMAKING?

Exactly. At certain moments in the film Vincent also questions me: he thinks I was using clichés, trying to turn him into a good guy by giving him a daughter. He tells me that wouldn't work. In a way Vincent represents me questioning myself as a filmmaker. Vincent is played by an actor and all the dialogues are written and rehearsed, but they are still taken from real life. I'm sure every story captures something from real life, even though it's not exactly real life.

IN "LUCKY ONE" YOU ALTERNATE FILMED SEQUENCES AND BLACK IMAGES, CONSEQUENTLY PLAYING WITH THE VISIBLE AND THE INVISIBLE. THE SPECTATOR CAN SEE THE DAUGHTER AND THE PROSTITUTE BUT CAN'T SEE VINCENT OR YOU/THE NARRATOR. WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO SHOW THE SECONDARY CHARACTERS BUT NOT THE PROTAGONISTS?

I wanted to maintain tension for the spectator, who keeps wondering whether the protagonists will become visible at some moment in the film. We actually did shoot the sequences with Vincent and his daughter but, in the course of the editing process, I gradually removed all those images. Sometimes I think my mission in life is to make films that no one else does. I wanted my film to be this space where you can fill in your own images but where you also can be Vincent. You never see him, but you see the city through his eyes as he drives the car through Paris. We have his gaze on the world. I didn't want to break this perspective by showing him on the screen. I also think it would be too simple for the spectator to judge him, since he is a gangster and doing things that are illegal. I wanted the spectator to be him too, just as we are all victims and perpetrators at the same time. I didn't want it to be too easy to separate ourselves from him and from the story. Since I was writing, directing and also editing the film, I was interested in myself as the narrative voice talking directly to the audience: you listen to my voice, imagine something. That was an interesting thing to play with.

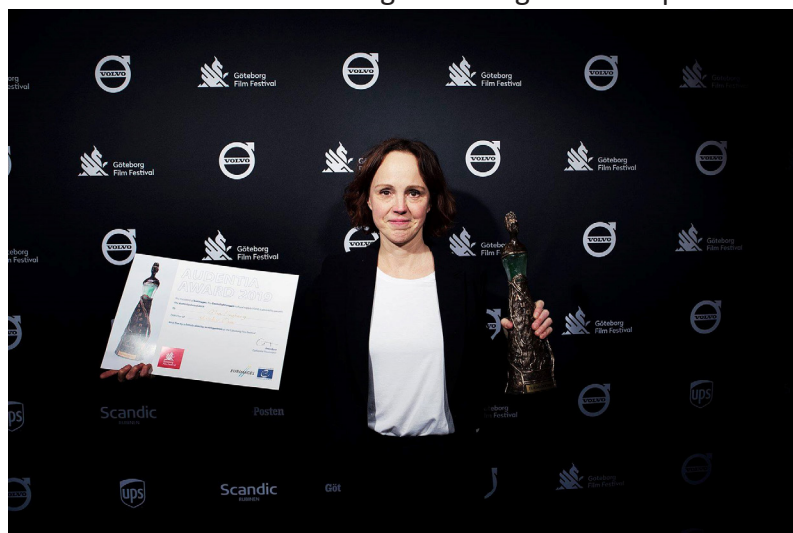
"LUCKY ONE" REFERS TO THE GIRL'S HAMSTER THAT IS LIVING IN A CAGE – IT MIGHT BE FREED, IT MIGHT BE KILLED. VINCENT WAS IN JAIL BEFORE AND HE'S STILL A PRISONER OF HIMSELF, OF HIS WAY TO MAKE MONEY BY WORKING FOR THE MAFIA. WE NEVER SEE THEM BUT VERY OBVIOUSLY HE IS DEALING WITH



"Lucky One"

WOMEN SEX WORKERS – A FORM OF MODERN SLAVERY. THE HAMSTER SEEMS TO BE A SYMBOL OF WHAT THE FILM IS ABOUT – LIFE IN PRISON OR AT LIBERTY.

Definitely. On a deeper level this film is about liberation. Are we free? Is freedom just an illusion or does the possibility of liberation exist? Vincent is imprisoned in his own life, in his car, in his job. The film is a tentative attempt to liberate him. And I think there's something strange about all those pets we keep. My daughter had two little mice in a cage and I felt so sorry for them. Even though their names are Happy and Lucky, I'd say they were pretty unlucky. In our civilised world I think we all long for liberation. We are working and working, consuming and consuming, running in a wheel. The little hamster was a symbol not only of Vincent but also of ourselves. The only one who is free in the film is the child. In the end, the daughter walks away into some kind of future even though her father tried to keep her under control. He is from Sicily and has very traditional values. As for manhood and masculinity, I think nowadays many men are imprisoned in an old-fashioned patriarchal trap. They should escape. Toxic masculinity is also a prison and the mafia Vincent is working for is a good example.



Mia Engberg © Carla Orrego Veliz

SINCE YOUR NARRATIVE FORM HAS SOMETHING OF A COMPOSITIONAL APPROACH, I SUPPOSE THE EDITING PROCESS IS A VERY CRUCIAL PHASE, IF NOT EVEN MORE IMPORTANT THAN THE SHOOTING ITSELF. WHAT WERE THE QUESTIONS YOU WERE ASKING YOURSELF DURING EDITING?

For me the editing process is a kind of writing process. We did the shooting in several steps so I could collect a certain amount of material, edit it, get back to shooting and then edit again. I think this method is closely

linked to my background as a documentary filmmaker. I don't feel comfortable with a shooting period of ten weeks during which everything has to be done. I prefer a long process of writing, shooting, editing, writing, shooting, editing. Sometimes I experience the editing room as a prison, especially when you are in the middle of the process and you still don't see the way out. And I'm inventing a genre, which means I don't have any rules to follow: I have to invent what I'm doing. It was very long. The first period alternating shooting and editing took a year, and then we edited for another year. In the end I had an editor to help me finish, since I'd become so tired. My working method doesn't conform to the standards of the film industry. I'd rather describe my way of working as one of an author or an artist. I feel very close to the work of Chantal Akerman.

EDITING "LUCKY ONE" CERTAINLY MEANT INTENSE WORK ON THE SOUND AS WELL. HOW DID YOU DEAL WITH THIS ACOUSTIC LAYER?

That was very much the case. I worked with the composer Michel Wenzler, who created the music at a very early stage of the film, since the rhythm is so important. I had music very early on to colour the scenes in a way.

The song the daughter is singing at the end is from a requiem by Gabriel Fauré, a very beautiful piece for a choir. I asked the composer to make music that had the same harmony and conveyed the same feeling. Old and new music walk hand in hand.

YOU RECENTLY WON THE AUDENTIA AWARD FOR "LUCKY ONE". CONGRATULATIONS! WHEN I TALK TO FILMMAKERS WHO HAVE BEEN AWARDED THIS DISTINCTION BY EURIMAGES, I ALWAYS WONDER WHAT SORT OF AUDACITY THE FILMMAKERS FEEL THEY HAVE SHOWN. WHAT WOULD YOU SAY TO THAT QUESTION?

In my view "audentia" has something to do with being brave. And to be honest, "Lucky One" was a very brave achievement. It's a film that doesn't look like anything else. Many people I had to deal with on my journey – financiers, distributors, etc. – found it too strange. I'm happy I was brave enough to stick to my idea and to finish it. It is not a film for everyone, but I think it will be remembered as unique. The prize meant a lot to me. There's the money of course, but also the honour and the recognition that I have created a challenging piece of work – and so soon after the film was released.