**Ethnography or auto- ethnography? The process of biographical construction in, the film, 'Moominland Tales - The Life of Tove Jansson’**

It’s great to be here in Stockholm. It is my second time. The first time I was here was in May two years ago. I spent just one afternoon in the city and although it was too brief a visit it was a fascinating one, spent with Professor Westin on the very first day of my research for the film, which I went on to produce and directe for the BBC. ‘Moominland Tales – The life of Tove Jansson’.

As the title of the film suggests the blurring between the biographical facts of Tove Jansson’s life and the fictional worlds she created is often a very fine line, and in the making of this film sometimes it became almost impossible to distinguish between the two.

By sharing with you the process of constructing the film, I hope to tease this apart and look at how my own biography and the context in which I wrote, directed and produced the film informed the final biographical screenwork.

So lets start with some definitions. (slide)

Broken down into its Latin roots, the word Biography, comes from *Bio*, life, and *graphia*, to write, literally meaning, life –writing.

The Oxford English Dictionary (2001) tells us that a biography is: (slide)

“an account of someone’s life written by someone else”

So, it would seem, therefore, that three essential things are needed for the construction of a biography. The ‘subject’, their life and an ‘author’.

The aim of mainstream modern biographies, within Western culture, has generally been the desire, both by the author and the reader, to access the ‘truth’ about the ‘subject’ and their ‘life’.

“The impulse behind the thirst for these books seems to be that we are getting close to the real truth of a person, ( to know) how other – usually famous – people have conducted their lives, and the readiness to learn from these lives how ordinary mortals might conduct their own’

James Noonan (Carleton University)

*Biography and Autobiography*

More often than not a popular biography will concern itself with the life of someone who is well- known or famous. As James Noonan suggests, the subject of a biography is rarely an ordinary mortal. Their lives are sold to the reader along with the hyperbolic prose created to describe it. Extraordinary, revelatory secret, shocking, glamorous, untold, unprecedented or definitive, are some of the words used by the author to tell the reader that the subject’s life is distinguishable from theirs.

The ‘subject’ is ‘special’, elevated to the Olympian heights of the Greek God whose life was divinely fascinating, and offers the readers a brief escape from their own mundane reality. (3.00)

The post - modern biographer is now required to delve deeper into the ‘private’, psyche of the subject, the increase and popularity of tabloid journalism, and reality TV has increased the appetite for this in the audience.

However ‘the subject’ to be dissected is no longer the coherent whole of the modernist paradigm with a nugget of universal truth at their centre. A biographer working in the post- modern era is dealing a post Freudian fractured notion of the psyche, a divided self, which reveals a split between the self we create in ‘public’ and the ‘internal’, private self.

Sociologist Erving Goffman (1959) likens this division in public persona to the "back stage" and "front stage" of a theatre. The ‘front stage’, is where we wear the mask, where we "perform" for a social "audience," the back stage” is where we plan and prepare for the performance, hidden from the audience.

However these psychic excavations of biographical subjects have the consequence of making a single truth impossible to locate.

The ‘private’ self often reveals profound contradiction, paradox and the ultimate unknowablity often taking the biographer even further away from their goal of finding some level of coherent definition, than when they set out on their quest.

So it would appear that the task, of finding a definitive truth about ‘the subject’, has become impossible in a post Freudian age. This also applies to the ‘author’, who is also working at both the public and the private level. The author ‘publically’ constructs the narrative of the subject, while unconsciously revealing facts about their own ‘private’ or inner life through the decisions they make in their attempt to construct a coherent whole.

Freud himself commented on this in his 1928 letter to British psychoanalyst James Strachey.

‘…anyone who writes a biography is committed to lies, concealment, hypocrisy, flattery and even to hiding his own lack of understanding, for biographical truth does not exist, and if it did we could not use it’.

Or as Norman. K. Denzin observes in *Interpretive Biography* (1989):

“Biographies are only fictional statements with varying degrees of “truth”, about “real” lives. Trues stories are stories that are believed in.”

Or as French philosopher Jacques Derrida argued there is no clear window into the inner life of a person, for any window is always filtered through the glaze (unreliability) of language, signs, and the process of signification.

The ideological, economic and historical context in which the biography is produced further complicates things and has a huge bearing on the outcome of the final text.

And on top of this is the questionable subjectivity of the author. The author of the biography can never claim to be totally subjective. So before I move into deconstructing the process of making the film about Tove Jansson I must, in true ethnographic style, declare my authorship and my own subjectivity only then will certain decisions remain transparent.(4.30)

Since the writings of *cahiers du cinema* established the notion of the auteur in film in the 1950’s, there has been an assumption that a film is created by a singular artist, the director (generally assumed to be male) and it expresses their personal vision, just as in literature F.R. Levis established the idea of the immutability of the creative genius.

As a female film director, and both an artist and also a collaborator, I have found this definition unhelpful throughout my career. (slide)

Film and TV is a collaborative medium. It involves the efforts of a collective group of people working towards a common end. It is group consciousness at work and not the single endeavor of an isolated artist.

The making of this documentary involved, what for TV is a small team. About thirteen people. (slide)

Here’s the researcher, director of photography, sound recordist, and finally myself both the producer and director. In a drama the numbers swell again, a film set could have a cast and crew of hundreds.

It also relies not only on the collaboration of a group of people working to a common goal but it also on a practice based methodology to gather the raw material that it will shape the final screenwork and draws on an eclectic mix of other genre’s such as History, politics, sociology, gossip, fiction, literary criticism, psychoanalysis, journalism, ethics and philosophy to engage with its subject.

I would argue then, that far from being the domaine of the auteur, the construction of a biographical documentary is far closer to the work of an ethnologist than a writer or a fine artist.

Ethnography, according to American historian James Clifford in his seminal book, The Predicament of Culture (1988), is:

“ A collection of diverse ways of thinking and writing about culture’, from an outsiders perspective.”

Like ethnography a documentary relies on rigorous field work, data collection, taped interviews, secondary research, analysis, psycho – geography, re enactment and the observation of the subject from both the point of view of the subject, but also from the subjects specific historical cultural and ideological context. Like ethnography film and TV uses archetypes and often also acknowledges, as in the work of British documentary maker Nick Broomfield, the subjectivity of the researcher/ author.

However the mainstream UK TV industry, particularly the BBC, has tended to cling onto the patriarchal modernist principles on which they were founded Among notions of progress, competition and profit, is also a tendency towards smoothing over these ethnographic practices in favour of a more literary model. Omniscience and the creation of an ‘all knowing’ seemingly objective, singular narrative that conceals the team effort and subjective inputs behind it, (slide)

An ethnographist is able to consider their subject, from multiple view points, often creating contradiction, disunity and paradox, much as the subject of a biography, something we know to be present in both Tove Jansson’s life and work. Wendy Lesser observes in, *Autobiography and the I of the beholder (1988)*

That:

…’when a writer writes a biography, he or she writes him or herself into the life of the subject written about. When the reader reads a biographical text, that text is read through the life of the reader. Hence, writers and readers conspire to create the lives they write and read about. Along the way, the produced text is cluttered by the traces of the real person being written about’.

So in the nature of ethnographic transparency I declare the nature of my own subjectivity and my interest in Tove Jansson which began when I read her books to my own children, having missed reading them as a child.

As an adult I found them entertaining and pleasingly philosophical, with an undercurrent of something more. All I knew about Jansson was from the blurb on the back cover of the book.

Here we come to one of the first of many fictions I encountered, written by her British publishers penguin but I encounter others some of them directly constructed by Tove herself. (slide)

“Tove Jansson was born in Helsingfors, Finland, in 1914. Her mother was a caricaturist and designed 165 of Finland’s stamps and her father was a sculptor.

Tove Jansson studied painting in Finland, Sweden and France. She lived alone on a small island in the Gulf of Finland, where most of her books where written.

Tove Jansson died in June 2001.”

So my perception of her was as a very private person and a recluse who lived on a remote island on her own. As a tortured genius who deliberately and successfully isolated herself from the trappings of fame.

I related strongly to the fact she was from Finland in Northern Europe and also that she was raised in an unconventional family setting among artists. I myself was the child of two actors and a working mother I also felt there was a strong cultural connection between Finland and the country of my birth Scotland.

When a colleague of mine tried unsuccessfully in the early 1990’s to make a film about Tove it confirmed my belief that she was as remote as the island she lived on, so when I was approached by a commissioning executive form the BBC. Franny Moyle in 2010, to make a film about Tove’s life, I jumped at the chance. My only reservation was how much of her story would be appropriate to tell. I realised after some initial research that Tove’s sexuality was still problematic, and to some extent under wraps, mainly because of her status as a children’s writer, and therefore knew that I would have to tread carefully if I was to tackle its overt revelation.

Of course it’s at this point that the question always occurs, why me? I am to be intimately involved intimately in the life of a person I have never met. Does this give me an advantage or a disadvantage? And what right do I have to do this and for what purpose?

This feeling is summed up by the author Muriel spark, whose I also made a TV biography about, and who herself wrote biographies of famous authors before she found fame herself as a fictional novelist.

In her short story, “The House of the Famous Poet”, written in the 50’s about an real incident that happened to her during the second world war , Muriel spark describes how she was forced to spent the night in a house where her acquaintance Elise work as a housekeeper, due to a travel delay, only to discover that the house she was staying in was no ordinary house but the house of a famous poet whose works she knew and admired. This has the effect of transforming, what she considered to be an ordinary house into an extraordinary one loaded with new meaning, it also explains well and in microcosm the process of creating biographical meaning, both for the author and the audience.

“I felt I had no right to be there, for it wasn’t now the house of Elise acting by proxy for some unknown people. It was the house of a famous modern poet. The thought that at any moment he and his family might walk in and find me there terrified me. I insisted that Elise should open the bathroom door and tell me to my face that there was no possible chance of their returning for many days to come.

Then I began to think about the house itself, which Elise was no longer accountable for. Its new definition, as the house of a poet whose work I knew well, many of whose poems I knew by heart, gave it altogether a new appearance.

To confirm this, I went outside and stood exactly where I had been when I first saw the garden form the door of the taxi. I wanted to get my first impression for a second time.

And this time I saw the absolute purpose in the overgrown garden, which since then, I have come to believe existed in the eye of the beholder. But at that time the room we had first entered, and which had riled me, now began to give back a meaning, and whatever it was, was right. The caked up bottle of ink, which Elise had put on the mantelpiece. I replace don the table to make sure. I saw a photograph I hadn’t noticed before, and I recognised the famous poet.”

Spark talks about the feeling of being an imposter, almost as if she is rifling through someone’s underwear drawer but she also insightfully observes that fame changes and alters our perceptions. What once seemed mundane, now had new meaning. A new impression is formed through the combination of evidence, ‘the ink bottle, the photograph’, are transformed from the inanimate to symbols of singificance. She knows the poet’s work too well to remain objective. The more she knows his work the more meaning she imposes on everything around her.

My training at the BBC instilled into me the Reithian values, that as a broadcaster it was my duty to educate, inform and entertain. Unfortunately since the appointment of John Birt during Thatcher’s era the focus inside the BBC became about chasing audience ratings and creating popular, rather than niche entertainment.

Already loaded with my own subjectivity, values, beliefs, assumptions and working within a BBC ideological and economic context, I began the quest, with my team, to chart Tove’s work and life and look for a way to negotiate the narrative of her life that would be authentic for us both.

The mutli - facetted nature of ‘the self’, plus Tove’s wide ranging skill as an artist, her prolific output, ambiguous sexuality, eclectic lifestyle and private personality, meant I had a heard task ahead.

By the end of the process I expected to be loaded down with facts but have more questions about Tove herself by the end of the process than when I started.

Process of construction:

Budget:

A film is made within an industrial context, in this case the commission was to deliver a 60 minute Arts biography for a BBC 4 audience and a price point, or budget around 100K

This may seem like a lot but it meant that we had to immediately restrict our locations and could only afford to film in one foreign country. Much welcome help from the family estate meant that the budget went further, and we could afford to put more on screen.

Filming in Finland was a necessity but other locations significant to Tove, like Sweden, France, and places she travelled to like Paris, New Orleans, and Florida were out of bounds due to the budget size. These exclusions shape the focus and narrative. It was hoped that Tottie’s home movies would compensate here and serve as illustration.

Other logistical issues such as the time of year, weather, availability of interviewees, health and safety, privacy, insurance and issues of censorship, both conscious and unconscious all affect the eventual outcome of the film.

Another factor which directly affected the editorial content was the intended audience. The audience research conducted for the BBC trust in November 2010 by Kantar Media concluded that a BBC audience came to the channel for films that:

‘focus in depth on relatively specialist areas of interest that may not have mainstream appeal…

And that :

‘BBC Four has a distinct audience profile and programming schedule. Viewers are more likely to be male, older in age, and of a higher social grade.’

This industrial context immediately introduces requirements and parameters. The duration of the film must be over 57 minutes but under 60. The budget of 100K, dictated the crew size, choice of locations, filming schedule and duration of the edit all of which impacts on the quality and depth of the finished film.

The expectations of the BBC 4 audience, ‘to focus in depth’, and produce a ‘specialist’ look at the subject, within the category of an ‘arts’ documentary which means that the focus of the film would be on Tove Jansson’s work output and the *relevant*  biographical details of her.

The transmission date, which would fall into the Christmas scheduling, also dictated the tone of the film. The slot, 9pm on Boxing Day required the film to be both ‘in depth’, to satisfy the expectations of the BBC 4 viewer, but also eye catching and entertaining, as it was airing during a period of heavy competition for viewers.

After a meeting with the executive producer, and an avid Moomin fan, it was decided that the film would be narrator led. Personally I am in favour of a more organic approach, letting the interviews and archive speak for themselves, but the in-house BBC style at the time required a strong editorial line in the form of wither an on screen presenter or authoritative narrator.

Within the schedule 6 full weeks were set aside for pre – production, which includes all the research, the creation of a script, a recce (initial scout to find contributors and locations) and the budgeting, scheduling and set up for the filming.

After researching as much as I could from the texts available I created a rough structure of her life by looking at a series of turning points.

In mainstream narrative convention, screenworks tend to be structured around textural turning points within the protagonists story arc.

As Norman.K . Denzin comments:

“The notion that lives are turned around by epiphanies, is deeply entrenched in Western thought…this means that biographical texts will typically be structured by the significant, turning point moments in a subjects life.”

Norman. K. Denzin *Interpretive Biography* (1989) (slide)

ROUGH STRUCTURE:

5.45 mins for each section (an author for each chapter of life)

**1. INTRODUCTION:**

Who is she? We need to look into work to find out

**Love and work**

**2. SUCCESS** :– the peak (Interweave this)

**3.EARLY LIFE AND CHILDHOOD** 1914 - 1936

**4.THE WAR AND BIRTH OF THE MOOMINS**

1938 - 1946

(Comet – fin family - Garm) 1944 studio

**5.VIVICA AND THE THEATRE** (MOOMIN SUMMER MADNESS)

1947

**6.FAME** - midpoint

1953 - 1957 (comic books and Sutton)

**7. ENTER T0O – TICKY AND THE ISLAND** – (1964 construction starts)

Tootie (fair play)

1958 – 1964

**8. TONAL CHANGE (MID WINTER)**

1957 - 1968

And death of the father

Moominpapa books – The Sulptors daughter (68)

**9. DEATH OF THE MOTHER AND MOOMINS AND BIRTH OF THE ADULT** AUTHOUR 1970 – 1980

(November – summer book – sun city)

**10. WRITERS BLOCK AND RECLUSE** at 80 (1994)

1982 - 2001

True deceiver – the toll of fame - messages

**11. Re- birth and celebration.**

2004 onwards (new slide)

I then set off on a recce to see how accurate this was and if and how I would be able to bring this to life on screen.

The recce took place between the 20th may – 27th May 2012. I visited many more locations than I was able to film in, some of them just to give me the feel of Tove’s psycho – geography, and involved the process of reconstruction and re enactment, to enable me to write sections of the script. Locations included, Stockholm, Helsinki, Pelinge, Tampere, Graveyards, hospitals, childhood haunts, workspaces, family spaces, public spaces and her art studio which was a treasure trove of both personal and factual information .

In also recorded interviews with family, friends, co-workers, experts and commentators, and discovered incidental characters, such as the janitor who

Worked next to and observed the party fresco’s.

The next stage was to write a first draft the script based on both the research and the results of the recce, a process that was on - going until the final voice over was recorded. Here’s my first stab at a rough structure which combines all my research and the information.

At this point my concept changed as I realised that not everyone I spoke to had the same view of Tove’s life and work. She herself contributed to her own mythology and was self confesses in her attempts to blur the facts of her life with the fiction of her imagination.

Prof Boel Westin in her article, *A Painters Reflection,* observes that

“…she (Tove) herself is the subject of her work. She represents version of herself in literature, painting, diaries and letters, ‘the present her, conceal her and document her is different roles and contexts”.

What I was able to conclude from my field trip was how extraordinarily she was both professionally and personally. What emerged is that she had a series of identities rather than one and she also experienced a number of profound transformations throughout her life, another trait not always common in the subjects I had studied before, particularly the famous who tended to get stuck professionally and emotionally after achieving fame – this was not the case with Tove. A new structure emerged to reflect that. I wanted to embrace and celebrate her diversity so the idea was to make 5 small films, almost as if they were each about a different personality. (slide)

1. The Sculptors Daughter
2. Moomin
3. The Lover
4. The Celebrity
5. The Hermit

This idea was too radical for the BBC. My executive producer thought this would be confusing to a British audience, many of whom may not have heard of Tove Jansson, or if they had they would still be learning in about the details of her life for the first time. I changed the script accordingly.

According to British script doctor and academic Phil Parker, a film must also have a genre and theme. This is the emotional heart of the film and what it is really about at its core. According to parker there are only four genres, thriller, horror, Romance and personal drama, and only 8 themes (universal emotions that every human being on the planet share). After some thought and easily dismissing horror and thriller I settled on the genre of personal drama and a theme of desire for order. It seemed to me that even more than a desire for love Tove’s life from early childhood until her death had been a struggle to find order in a chaotic family, country at war, at sea, in a competitive profession and even within her own psyche.

At this point the central visual metaphor, which I choose for all my films, for fter all it is also, like the comic book, the painting and a picture book a visual medium, of the storm.

Here’s where the ethno – graphic part comes in. Disorder is probably also the main theme of my life. Another filmmaker may have chosen to make this a romance. The film you saw yesterday about Tove’s art was a personal drama/ desire for validation theme.

Maybe this theme reflects my own biography more than Tove’s?

This was the opening for the second draft script, that we used as a shooting script for the filming:

Prologue:

EXT. PELINGE PENISULA – FINLAND

We look across the stormy sea towards tiny, pine-clad atolls peppering the horizon line. A tern screams before it dives stealthily towards a wave.

CAPTION: PELINGE PENISULA – FINLAND

Behind an old wooden boat shed is a cottage built lovingly from planks of red painted wood.

Inside, 92-year-old Greta mounts the stairs with the help of a stick. She gets to the top and enters a small attic room. The room is empty apart from a single bed and a desk and chair, facing a window with a view of a meadow surrounded by old pines. Spartan, like a monk’s cell

**NARRATOR:**

**In 1970 Tove Jansson wrote the last book in the Moomintroll family series, a series she had started in the closing months of the World War Two and one that would become so popular it would rank her among the most successful children’s authors of all time.**

We see Tove Jansson in a photo hanging on the wall of the attic room. Her hair grey and face gaunt, she wears an enigmatic smile, a cigarette poised between her fingers.

***Greta Gustafsson:*** *(family friend – speaking Swedish)*

*‘I remember Tove sitting at that desk and writing ‘Moominvalley in November’. It was a sad time for her, her mother had just died, and after that she felt she could no longer write about the Moomin family, so she was saying goodbye to them here.’*

Greta stares out across the lush green meadow. The small room is lost in silence but for the sound of distant sea wash.

Filming:

Before we began to film the Director of photography, Carol D’Allessandro and myself discussed the visual look of the film. We wanted it to reflect the colours of Tove’s work and illustrations, so Carlo suggested we use a ‘tilt’ and shift lens which would give the film and other worldly look and have the result of miniaturising the landscape, an idea we got form visiting the Moominhouse in the museum in Tampere.

**Production:** (2 weeks)

* Filming

½ day Glasgow

1 day Childhood museum Edinburgh (1 interview)

10 day shoot in Finland (20th August – 30th August). Helsinki, Pelinge, Tampere (13 interviews)

1 day London (2 interviews)

Once we had gathered all the material the edit begins.

Here the film will be completely re written again, and often the structure of the film can change dramatically. Also the availability or non -availability of archive can dramatically shape the film. Tootie’s super 8 footage became problematic to acquire and transfer, it inclusion or exclusion would have altered the film profoundly.

**Post – Production:** (9 weeks)

* Logging – 1 week
* Off line edit – 6 weeks
* Post production – 2 weeks (voice overs/ grade/ sound mix)

The last editorial decisions to be made are with the narrator, which the executive producer signs off. There are inevitably always discussions around this. The director always wants less and the executives always want more. Here is the end result. A very different opening to the one envisaged in the shooting script.

‘Moomins’

10:08:07

NARRATOR

Finland is the home of the Moomins.

The Moomins are the peace-loving, philosophical, family of Moominpappa, Moominmamma and their son Moomintroll.

Conceived in the 1940s as a series of children’s books, the Moomins are now a global phenomenon making their creator Tove Jansson one of the most successful children’s authors of all time.

10:00:41

And yet she remains eclipsed by the success of her work. She is known, if at all, for her supposed hermit-like existence on a remote island in the Gulf of Finland and not for the lyrical, adult fiction she wrote here, nor the career as a painter she pursued so ardently throughout her life.

Like her work, Tove Jansson’s own story has many other sides and transformations. From her birth in 1914 to her death in 2001, her life was as colourful, complex and as stormy as her greatest creations.

Transmission:

The film received a number of favourable previews and reviews, here one form the Guardian newspaper.

“Affectionate and beautifully shot survey of the life and works of Finnish author and illustrator Tove Jansson, creator of the enduring Moomins series of children's books. The picture that emerges is much as might be expected: the curiosity and humanity – or Moominity – of her famous creations seem to have been all hers, but the writerly need for solitude was expressed in her eventual retreat to an island in the Gulf of Finland. Features the recollections of friends and peers, and unprecedented access to Jansson's personal archive.

Guardian Review 21/ 12/ 12

There was a very positive reaction on my Facebook and Twitter feeds but disappointingly only received around 600,000 viewers on transmission, but was popular on BBC internet I player, has been repeated on BBC2 this year and has been illegally posted on you tube.

Conclusions?

We that’s up to you the audience to decide.

What is real and what is in the imagination?

Does the film come close to capturing Tove Jansson?

Is there such thing as a definitive biography?

How much is the film about the subject, how much about the author and how much is it about you?

As I concluded at the start. I am left with a film but also with more questions than when I started my journey in Stockholm over two years ago.