

Berlinale  
 70<sup>th</sup> Internationale  
Filmfestspiele  
Berlin  
**Encounters**  
\*\*WORLD PREMIERE\*\*

# GUNDA



**Directed by** Victor Kossakovsky  
**Produced by** Anita Rehoff Larsen, **Co-Produced by** Joslyn Barnes, Susan Rockefeller  
**Executive Produced by** Joaquin Phoenix

2020 / Norway/USA / black & white / without dialogue / 93 mins

## **FESTIVAL SCREENINGS**

*Saturday 22/02 | 20:45 | CinemaxX 5+10 - P&I*  
**Sunday 23/02 | 12:30 | CinemaxX 7 - WORLD PREMIERE**  
Director's Talk: Sunday 23/02 | 14:50 | Hyatt Hotel Press Conference Room  
Monday 24/02 | 20:00 | Cubix 6  
Friday 28/02 | 12:30 | Zoopalast 1  
Sunday 01/03 | 10:00 | Urania (Cross Section @Generation)

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## **SHORT SYNOPSIS**

Where his prior film, the acclaimed epic *AQUARELA*, was a reminder of the fragility of human tenure on earth, in *GUNDA*, master filmmaker Victor Kossakovsky reminds us that we share our planet with billions of other animals. Through encounters with a mother sow (the eponymous Gunda), two ingenious cows, and a scene-stealing, one-legged chicken, Kossakovsky movingly recalibrates our moral universe, reminding us of the inherent value of life and the mystery of all animal consciousness, including our own.

## **LONG SYNOPSIS**

In the vastness of the living world, we share our planet with billions of farm animals. However, in industrialized societies we are conditioned to ignore the sentience of these animals, often regarded as a passive resource. Where his prior film *AQUARELA* was a reminder of the fragility of human tenure on earth, in *GUNDA*, master filmmaker Victor Kossakovsky offers a radically recalibrated moral universe, where encounters with a mother sow (the eponymous Gunda), two ingenious cows, and a scene-stealing, one-legged chicken, remind us of the inherent value of life for all beings.

By returning a pig's gaze, listening to a cow's gentle lowing, or observing a chicken find its wings, Kossakovsky voids any pretension that we are unique in our capacity for emotion, consciousness or will. Immersed in these animals' lives, lived to the full in joy and pain, it becomes inescapable that humankind must swiftly undertake the major changes necessary to end mass exploitation of our fellow creatures. *GUNDA* is Kossakovsky's deeply personal attempt to renew our vision of life and meditate on the mystery of all animal consciousness, including our own.

"GUNDA is a mesmerizing perspective on sentience within animal species, normally - and perhaps purposely - hidden from our view. Displays of pride and reverence, amusement and bliss at a pig's inquisitive young; her panic, despair and utter defeat in the face of cruel trickery, are validations of just how similarly all species react and cope with events in our respective lives. Victor Kossakovsky has crafted a visceral meditation on existence that transcends the normal barriers that separate species. It is a film of profound importance and artistry."

- **Joaquin Phoenix, Executive Producer**

"GUNDA is pure cinema. This is a film to take a bath in - it's stripped to its essential elements, without any interference. It's what we should all aspire to as filmmakers and audiences - pictures and sound put together to tell a powerful and profound story without rush. It's jaw dropping images and sound put together with the best ensemble cast and you have something more like a potion than a movie." - Paul Thomas Anderson

- **Paul Thomas Anderson**

## **DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT**

Growing up I was very much a city kid, but at the age of four I spent a few months in a village in the countryside, where I met my best friend Vasya. He was much younger than me - just a few weeks old when we met - but over time he became my dearest friend and the times we spent together are some of the most cherished memories from my childhood.

One day, when we were still young, Vasya was killed and served as pork cutlets for a New Year's Eve dinner. I was devastated and immediately became (probably) the first vegetarian kid in the Soviet Union.

As a consequence, since I became a filmmaker I have always wanted to make a film about the creatures with whom we share the earth, a film about animals as living, feeling beings in their own right. I wanted to make a film without patronizing or humanizing them, without any sentimentality, and without vegan propaganda. However, as the film I had in mind is not about dolphins, elephants, pandas or other cute animals we love to love, it was impossible to finance. I tried for almost three decades until I finally met Norwegian producer Anita Rehoff Larsen from Sant & Usant who took the risk on making it.

We were unbelievably lucky to meet Gunda in the Norwegian countryside on the very first day of our research trip. Gunda is on the screen for over half of the runtime of the final film and is an extraordinarily powerful character - you do not need an interpreter to understand her emotions and experiences. As such I decided to make this film without any captions, voice-over, or music, you just need to watch it and allow yourself to feel.

For me, the essence of cinema is showing, not telling. I do not make films if I want to tell an audience something I have no interest in prescribing an opinion. I make films if there is something I want people to see and to allow them to find their own conclusion. Documentary cinema is a great tool to show the realities of the world, to show things that we do not see by ourselves, that we do not want to see, or that we have collectively agreed that we do not see, and so we allow ourselves not to think about. With GUNDA I want people to see these animals as sentient beings and to encourage them to think about the possibility of their consciousness and selfhood. With that I feel that GUNDA is the most personal and important film I have made as a filmmaker and as a human being.

- **Victor Kossakovsky**

## **A CONVERSATION WITH DIRECTOR VICTOR KOSSAKOVSKY**

**Your last film, *AQUARELA* looked at the majesty and power of nature through water in its various forms around the world. Here, you show the intimacy of nature in several farms. In both, there appears to be a conflict between human activity and its environment. Do you see a common thread between these two films in terms of humanity's attitude toward nature?**

There absolutely is a common thread. In fact, I would include ¡VIVAN LAS ANTÍPODAS! along with *AQUARELA* and now *GUNDA* in a loose trilogy. Having travelled extensively around the world, which I certainly did for these films, I met people who look different, feel differently, and think differently, and in the course of making these films I became a different person. I realized that what is often missing in our attitude towards our surroundings is respect – for people, for the environment, and certainly for the animals who we share this planet with. I know that I cannot change this world, that my films cannot change this world, but still I felt I had to do something. I cannot stop people from doing what they do, but perhaps I can at least make them look more closely at what it is they are denying or destroying.

**Historically there is an overall acceptance by humanity that we have dominion over non-humans, that their lives are inherently less valuable than ours, do you see *GUNDA* as a repudiation of that?**

My idea is very simple: we as humans are ready to change our attitudes to our fellow beings. That might be a very optimistic perspective, but at least there are some hints as to why it might be possible. When I wrote the script, I hadn't yet read "21 Lessons for the 21st Century", the book by Yuval Harari. After reading it, however, I found some of its theses very similar to what I was trying to express.

Human attitudes do change over time, and I would like to think we can learn certain things from our experiences. For a few hundred years, it was important to establish respect for the value of human life. It took centuries to even acknowledge that all human beings deserve the same rights. Perhaps now we can take the next step and admit that every living creature has similar rights. Pigs, butterflies, elephants – all of them have the same rights to live on this planet. We shouldn't always put ourselves in the center. We can do better than that. We are not totally awful. We did eventually come to the conclusion that slavery was unjust, we have started to respect the rights of women, of people of different genders, and to me that is a sign that we are increasing our understanding of the world.

**How did you choose the remarkable animals in this film?**

When I was a kid – I must have been four years old – I spent some months with relatives in the country, and they had Vasya, a piglet who became my friend, he obviously was an intelligent creature who loved me and whom I loved in return. That certainly

influenced the choice of having Gunda as my main character. We met Gunda on the very first day of our research. Normally, I spend a lot of time before I discover the heart of my film. In this case, I opened the door to the pigsty, Gunda came towards me, and I told my producer Anita Rehoff Larsen: We have found our Meryl Streep.

Other farm animals have accompanied me step by step throughout my life. In my film *THE BELOVS* (1992), the main character is milking her cow and when she is done, she kisses the cow and tells her: "Thank you very much for your milk." She had such a profound and beautiful relationship with her animals, based on what I can only describe as mutual respect. When the media talk about animals, it's often about popularly beloved creatures like whales, pandas, dolphins or koala bears – I didn't want cute animals. I felt that would detract from the larger message. There are billions of pigs, and almost all of them will live a year at most. 1.5 billion cows we will kill after two to four years. 50 billion chickens each year will not even live to be one year old. We don't think about this much. Try a thought experiment: imagine creatures stronger than us – a race of supermen, of aliens, more intelligent than us, who will take our babies after they are born to feed them and kill them. This is what we do to animals. History is written by the victors. We "won" the history of the earth for now, but who knows what happens next.

**What common misconceptions does human society attach to 'farm animals' in terms of their emotional and intellectual capacity?**

Our entire treatment of animals is based on misconception. In some countries there are laws stating outright that animals don't suffer - it's written into the very fabric of the law. This is absurd. Everyone who is in regular contact with animals knows that they feel, they have emotions, they are conscious. We know this is the truth but have tacitly agreed to disregard our empirical knowledge. Instead we deny them their natural lives.

Just as an example, in *GUNDA* you can see how much time animals spend digging in the ground. In factory farms they live on concrete floors and have no chance to dig, to behave like they normally would. Cows can live ten or twenty years. We kill them after 3-4 years or even younger. In *GUNDA*, you see an old cow - think about how insane it is that most people will never have seen an old cow! She has lived a full life, she has a destiny, and she communicates all of this only through her eyes, through the way she looks at us. One cannot miss this if one looks attentively. If people believe that humans have souls, they should agree that animals have souls too.

**The shots you captured showing the relationship between mother and children in this particular family of swine are amazing. Did it take a lot of patience waiting for those moments to reveal themselves?**

Normally, what I do when I start a film is, I read a lot of books, I talk to scientists, and I try to learn everything about my subject. This helps to know when something important is about to happen. For example, I learned from the literature that just before giving birth, a mother sow's breathing and heart rate will change. We monitored her for those signs.

Still, it takes time to simply observe, but to me, this is endlessly fascinating if I have the right subjects.

**What challenges did you encounter filming the animals? How did you physically shoot the scenes inside the pig's hut?**

We built an exact copy of Gunda's pigsty, but with removable panels. We could go around a full 360 degrees without being physically in the hut ourselves. The lens was inside, we weren't, so we wouldn't disturb the pigs. But it was less of a challenge than it might have been, because she was friendly and patient with us and let us observe her.

**The film has no human dialogue, no score, and no on-screen text. Can you explain why you chose to keep to animal sounds as the only audio and to not explain with captions?**

Many films are made about animals, and normally, they feature people talking about them, explaining them. That takes the attention away from the animals. I didn't want to patronize or humanize them. Films that show animal slaughter and explain all its gory detail also don't work. It is propaganda, and people block it out. So, I thought, let's see what the camera can do on its own. Just look! Cinema is made for this, to make you see what you might not be able to see normally. Cinema can provide an emotional, experiential approach to a topic. It seemed the right approach to go back to the beginning of cinema. I didn't want to introduce extraneous elements such as a score. I wanted to show how animals communicate. If you look closely, Gunda speaks to us. I didn't want to drown her voice.

**What informed your decision to shoot the film in black and white?**

The decision to shoot in black and white was made for a similar reason. For one thing, this brings me back to the origin of cinema, to the birth of cinema. Also, depending on the circumstances, color can be overwhelming. If you see blood in color, it is too naturalistic and your attention wanders. Often, lush colors will make us focus on different things, such as the background. I didn't want to show cute pink piglets – and believe me, they are very cute indeed. I didn't want to seduce the viewer in that way. It felt to me like black and white makes us focus on their soul rather than their appearance.

**You have mentioned it took some time for this film to come to fruition, how did you connect with your producers and with funding for the project?**

It really seems almost like a miracle that I was finally able to do GUNDA. I tried to make this film at least ten times over 25 years, and it was never possible. Nobody got this, nobody understood how it would be possible or who would watch it. I had experience working with Anita Rehoff previously, and she simply trusted me that I was going to produce something worth seeing. I don't want to sound mawkish, but it really was a blessing that she took this huge risk for me and the film. I cannot thank her enough for that. Then in the middle of the production Joslyn Barnes and Louverture films came

onboard and they helped us to finish the film and take it to the next level in terms of distribution possibilities. In fact, it is the second time that Joslyn and Louverture films have helped me crucially - it is quite fair to say that *AQUARELA* wouldn't have been possible without her help.

**What would you like audiences to take away? Is this film a “call to action”?**

Yes, *GUNDA* to me has a very simple message: **We can do better**. I want to help people to take the first step to eliminate the act of killing from their lives. In 1900, Leo Tolstoy wrote in his essay “The First Step: An Essay on the Morals of Diet” that we will not fundamentally change our lives unless we stop killing. The fact that human beings kill each other is not so much a consequence of different ideologies but something far more atavistic. We don't merely have to accept that we shouldn't kill one another. We must realize that it is the act of killing itself, regardless of who we kill, that is terrible. Once we understand this, war will disappear. Tolstoy wrote this 120 years ago, and now would be a good time to take that to heart.

## **FILMMAKER BIOS**

### **DIRECTOR - Victor Kossakovsky**

Victor Kossakovsky was born in Saint Petersburg (Leningrad at the time) on July 19, 1961. An innovative documentary filmmaker, his films have been honored with more than 100 awards in national and international festivals. His distinctive filmography spans many different subjects but always explores the interplay of reality and poetic moments.

He began his career in motion pictures at the Leningrad Studio of Documentaries as assistant cameraman, assistant director and editor in 1978. He studied screenwriting and directing at Moscow HCSF from 1986-1988. In 1989 he directed his first feature LOSEV and then in 1992 made his name with international critics and audiences with his documentary THE BELOVS, which won both the VPRO Joris Ivens Award and the Audience Award at IDFA and dozens of other awards at international festivals around the world. In 2011, Kossakovsky's ¡VIVAN LAS ANTIPODAS! was selected as the opening film of the Venice Film Festival. SQUARELA, his technologically groundbreaking and globe-spanning documentary on the shapes of water also premiered in Venice in 2018 before being shortlisted for the Oscar® for Best Documentary, among other honors.

In many of his films Kossakovsky has served simultaneously as director, editor, cinematographer and writer. Currently based in Berlin, he continues to serve as a teacher and mentor to aspiring filmmakers and documentarians globally.

### **PRODUCER - Anita Rehoff**

Anita Rehoff Larsen has produced for Norwegian and international directors since 2010. She is co-owner of the production company Sant & Usant together with producer and director Tone Grøttjord-Glenne. Together they have produced the company's award winning films such as EXIT, 69 MINUTES OF 86 DAYS, DANCING FOR YOU, I AM KUBA, and more. Anita is educated in film studies from the UK and has developed as an international producer from EURODOC. Anita looks for directors with a strong cinematic voice, and started working with Victor Kossakovsky in 2013 producing his first documentary for children VARICELLA which was awarded at IDFA in 2016.

### **CO-PRODUCER - Joslyn Barnes**

Joslyn Barnes is a writer, producer and co-founder of New York based Louverture Films together with Danny Glover and partners Susan Rockfeller, Bertha Foundation and Sawsan Asfari. Among the films she has been involved with producing are the features: BAMAKO by Abderrahmane Sissako; Apichatpong Weerasethakul's UNCLE BOONMEE WHO CAN RECALL HIS PAST LIVES, CEMETERY OF SPLENDOR and the forthcoming MEMORIA; Deepak Rauniyar's WHITE SUN; Lucrecia Martel's ZAMA; and Nadine Labaki's CAPERNAUM. Among the documentaries are: Tia Lessin and Carl Deal's TROUBLE THE WATER; Göran Hugo Olsson's BLACK POWER MIXTAPE 1967-1975, CONCERNING VIOLENCE and THAT SUMMER; Eugene Jarecki's THE HOUSE I LIVE IN; Tala Hadid's HOUSE IN THE FIELDS and the forthcoming FOREST OF STONE; Yance Ford's STRONG ISLAND;

RaMell Ross's HALE COUNTY THIS MORNING, THIS EVENING and EASTER SNAP; Victor Kossakovsky's SQUARELA and the forthcoming GUNDA; and Lucrecia Martel's forthcoming CHOCOBAR. In 2017, Barnes was the recipient of both the Cinereach Producer Award and the Sundance Institute | Amazon Studios Producer Award. In 2010, 2018 and 2019 she was nominated for Emmy® Awards, and won in 2018 for Exceptional Merit in Documentary Filmmaking. In 2018 and 2019 she earned Oscar® Nominations for best Documentary Feature.

## **PRODUCTION COMPANIES**

### **Sant & Usant**

Sant & Usant is a Norwegian production company established in 2006. The company has developed a strong voice in the Nordic and European documentary industry, producing films for established filmmakers as well as new strong voices. Their films have been distributed both theatrically, on TV, and on VOD platforms. The company focuses on films with new visual perspectives and also regularly works on films with underrepresented voices. The company has been nominated and received awards for their films in festivals such as Hot Docs, IDFA, Sheffield, CPH:DOX.

### **Louverture Films**

Louverture Films produces independent films of historical relevance, social purpose, commercial value and artistic integrity. Taking its name and inspiration from the leader of the Haitian Revolution, Toussaint Louverture - famous for always creating an "opening" in the face of enormous obstacles - Louverture Films partners with progressive filmmakers and producers around the world and particularly from the global South, and pro-actively supports the employment and training of cast and crew from communities of color in the United States.

## **CREDITS**

**Director/writer/editor:** VICTOR KOSSAKOVSKY  
**Directors of photography:** EGIL HÅSKJOLD LARSEN & VICTOR KOSSAKOVSKY  
**First assistant director/co-writer/co-editor:** AINARA VERA  
**Sound designer/sound editor:** ALEXANDR DUDAREV  
**Second unit camera & assistant director:** POL ROIG  
**First assistant camera/focus puller:** CHRISTIAN KARLSEN  
**Gaffer/grip:** GIANMARCO DONAGGIO  
**Digital b&w grading:** MICHAŁ HERMAN  
**Line producer:** CHARLOTTE HAILSTONE  
**Production manager:** RACHA H. LARSEN  
**Producer:** ANITA REHOFF LARSEN  
**Co-producers:** JOSLYN BARNES & SUSAN ROCKEFELLER  
**Executive producers:** JOAQUIN PHOENIX, TONE GRØTTJORD-GLENNE  
**Co-executive producer:** REGINA K. SCULLY

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