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Official Selection

# AQUARELA



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A Cinematic Experience  
A film by Victor Kossakovsky  
90 minutes

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## **VENICE SCREENINGS - OUT OF COMPETITION**

**Press & Industry Screening**  
**Press & Industry Screening**  
**Official Screening**  
**Repetition Screening**

Friday, 31/08 I 19:30 I Sala Perla  
Friday, 31/08 I 22:00 I Sala Darsena  
Saturday, 01/09 I 14:00 I Sala Grande  
Saturday 08/09 I 14:00 I Sala Darsena

# AQUARELA

## SYNOPSIS

*Aquarela* takes audiences on a deeply cinematic journey through the transformative beauty and raw power of water. Captured at a rare 96 frames-per-second, the film is a visceral wake-up call that humans are no match for the sheer force and capricious will of Earth's most precious element. From the precarious frozen waters of Russia's Lake Baikal to Miami in the throes of Hurricane Irma to Venezuela's mighty Angel Falls, water is *Aquarela's* main character, with director Victor Kossakovsky capturing her many personalities in startling cinematic clarity.

## **Director's Statement**

Looking back, it seems that for my whole life I have been preparing to make *Aquarela*. Almost fifty years ago, when I was just 4 years old, I spent one summer in a small village between Moscow and St. Petersburg. In that village was the source of a river. A man who lived there, Mikhail Belov, said to me, "Imagine Victor, if you made a little boat from wood chip and leaves, then put it in this river, it would float on the water to the North Sea and then around the world."

Twenty-five years later I returned to that village to shoot my film, *Belovy*, which is about the people who live at the source of the river. The first episode was exactly as Mikhail had described to me: I put my camera into a little boat and I made an almost 1,000 kilometer journey from that village to the sea. For this river scene I used a song from one of Raj Kapoor's films. I had chosen this song, without knowing Hindi, simply because of its powerful energy, which fit well with my river episode. A few years later, and after a screening in India, some people told me that the song is about a river that flows like our lives.

Then in 2000, while editing my film, *I Loved You*, at Bornholm Island, I stayed in a house with a window looking out on the Baltic Sea. I noticed that the sea was different every day, every hour, even every minute. I was never bored because the water was never the same. I thought that if I could just film the waves from my window during a whole year, I could easily make a great film, without saying a word and without moving the camera, just watching the water changing! Different colors, different movements, different energies ... through the natural lens of water you would be able to experience and feel the ebb and flow of all known human emotions — anger, aggression, peacefulness, nobility, loneliness, jealousy ... everything!

With *Aquarela*, I wanted to film every possible emotion that can be experienced while interacting with water — beautiful emotions, along with unsettling emotions of ecstasy and inspiration, as well as destruction and human devastation.

— **Victor Kossakovsky**

## ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

Victor Kossakovsky's *Aquarela* poses a thought-provoking question: what would a movie feel like if its main character — its driving emotional heartbeat — was not human at all, but an element of nature?

Spanning the globe, *Aquarela* unfolds as a fiercely lyrical, multi-sensorial experience that seeks to break the boundaries between human and nature. The film includes footage captured in seven different countries — Scotland, Mexico, Russia, Greenland, Venezuela, Portugal and the U.S. — plus dramatic, exclusive footage taken cross the Atlantic Ocean. The screen becomes an access point for audiences to give in to pure sensation — seeing, hearing and viscerally feeling the essence of a substance so essential to us that we usually take all its glories — and its incipient threats — for granted. At a time rife with catastrophic images that overwhelm, *Aquarela* attempts something entirely different. It invites audiences to come closer, and even closer, so that you might enter nature's power and experience our own raw fragility in a new way.

The film is presented by Participant Media together with Mitteldeutsche Medienförderung, Creative Scotland, BFI, Deutscher Filmförderfonds – DFFF, Medienboard Berlin - Brandenburg and Danish Film Institute, in association with Cactus World Films, a Ma.ja.de Film, Aconite and Danish Documentary production, in co-production with Louverture Films and produced in co-production with Rundfunk Berlin-Brandenburg in association with ARTE and in association with Rio Negro Producciones and Ánorâk Film. *Aquarela* has also received additional financial support from Sundance Film Institute, Tribeca Film Institute and The Government of Greenland. Endeavor Content and Lionsgate International are handling international sales.

The film is a UK, German and Danish production, produced by, Aimara Reques (Aconite Productions), Heino Deckert (ma.ja.de), Sigrid Dyekjær (Danish Documentary); co-produced by Joslyn Barnes (Louverture Films), Susan Rockefeller, Emile Hertling Péronard (Ánorâk Film); executive produced by Participant Media's Jeff Skoll and Diane Weyermann, along with Mark Thomas, Isabel Davis, Sawsan Asfari, Maya Sanbar, Madge Bray, Matthias Ehrenberg, and Frank Lehmann.

Kossakovsky did not just want to film water. He wanted to give water the chance to tell its own beautiful, mysterious, yet urgent story on an epic journey from ocean to sky, as it constantly changes moods. To capture all those moods and forms, Kossakovsky filmed in 96 frames-per-second, discovering inventive new ways to shoot water in perilous conditions that cameras don't like. But the technological ambitions and risk-taking of *Aquarela* were always focused on one thing: making an emotional connection--as icebergs seduce, monster waves claw the sky, a lake swallows cars, and a waterfall's spectral mist expresses solace and potential.

For Kossakovsky, the filmmaking was its own awakening to a subject about which he has become extremely passionate. "When I was first approached about making a film about water, I actually refused," he recalls. "I have seen several dozens of films about water in the last ten years. But they are mostly people just talking about water — the importance of water, politics of water, lack of water, climate change and water. But in these films you don't really *see* water, you don't really see her. So I said if we are going to do another film talking about water, then no, I am not interested in this. But if water will speak by herself for 90 minutes, if water will have a chance to be our main actor — this I will do."

As a filmmaker, Victor Kossakovsky has long resisted categorization. He has been classified as a documentarian, but the term feels narrow in the face of work that embraces emotion, intuition and the metaphysical. He certainly draws from the tradition of non-fiction storytelling, but his signature has been trying to dissolve traditional forms to get to something more pure and direct.

Kossakovsky first made his mark in 1992 with *Belovy*, a revealingly intimate view of one rural Russian family. He went on to make, among others, *Wednesday, 19.7.1961*, a film that intimately portrays the 100 persons who were born the same day as Kossakovsky in St. Petersburg (Leningrad at the time); *Tishe!*, during which he filmed a construction site from his apartment window for a full year; *Svyato*, a film about self-identity capturing the first time his toddler son saw his reflection in the mirror at two years old; *Vivan Las Antipodas!*, an epic adventure touring four pairs of antipodean lands — Argentina & China, Russia & Chile, Spain & New Zealand, Hawaii & Botswana; and *Demonstration*, in which he sent film students to shoot protests in Barcelona, specifically outside Barcelona's Opera House, and wove the resulting images into a cinematic symphony.

In Kossakovsky's much-shared list, "10 Rules for Documentary Filmmaking," the first statute he offers is this: "*Don't film if you can live without filming.*" This precept, to which he has held himself accountable, has drawn him to disparate subjects — but only subjects that ignite that kind of drive. That became true for *Aquarela*, though it was its own journey to get there.

It began with award-winning producer Aimara Reques, founder of Scotland's Aconite Productions. She had been approached by her sister and brother-in-law — two academics dedicated to politics — to make a more conventional, educational film on the mounting global water crisis. But while Reques felt drawn to water as a subject, a talking-heads doc didn't get her heart going. She wondered if there was another way — a way to grapple with water beyond passive contemplations of facts, figure and politics. "This is just the way I am," Reques says. "I have to be motivated by passion and I felt the power of water is so extraordinary. How do we really understand such a subject? Humans are 70 percent water, so how can we reconnect with that essence within ourselves?"

This is what led her to approach Kossakovsky. An admirer of his films, Reques had pursued working with him for years. When Kossakovsky initially rebuffed her, she wasn't deterred. Then, a breakthrough came. "One day I said to Victor, what if we call this film *Aquarela* and that means you are painting with water and color on screen? Immediately he said, 'now we are talking!' I could see his imagination already at work. Victor comes from a place of instinct and it's the same for me. The film became our mission, and I hope people feel the love and intensity that went into it."

For Kossakovsky, it had to be an all-or-nothing proposition. He explains: "When I give you a 90-minute film, I'm asking you to give me 90 minutes of your unique time. You're not kissing your boyfriend; you're not playing with your kids; you're not eating ice cream during that time. So that means I have to be sure that I will give you something you have never experienced before. I have to believe what you are going to see and feel will be things you haven't seen like this before."

Kossakovsky's work invites the viewer to experience his imagery viscerally, in the body. But the creation of that work can be a long, challenging and unpredictable process, which was especially true of *Aquarela*. "When we started, I think we had no idea how complex the film would be," Reques muses, able to laugh now that she has some distance on what was at times an almost absurdly daunting production.

A crack international filmmaking team provided a big boost. Several more producers, each bringing their own experience and love of Kossakovsky's work, jumped aboard: Berlin-based Heino Deckert (*Human Flow, My Joy*), known for his committed support of director-driven documentaries, who also produced Kossakovsky's acclaimed *¡Vivan Las Antipodas!*; Sigrid Dyekjær (*Ai Weiwei: The Fake Case, The Monastery, Something Better To Come*), a Danish producer of more than 20 acclaimed documentaries; and New York-based Joslyn Barnes, founder of Louverture Films (*Bamako, Trouble the Water, Black Power Mix Tape*) and an Academy Award nominee for her 2017 documentary feature, *Strong Island*, a true story of murder, grief and race.

Deckert, who has been producing Kossakovsky's work since 2008, knew that once Kossakovsky latched onto the idea, the unexpected would result. "Victor is somebody you can send anywhere and he will find a film — or rather a film finds him," he says. "He likes when he has just an abstract idea to start him thinking and then he goes in search of how that idea expresses itself."

Continues Deckert, "Victor sees things that others just don't see. He has a very special kind of view and that is why you can put him anywhere and he will come upon images no one else would. He likes to go where it's difficult and he likes extremes, but he doesn't like extremes just for extreme's sake. He likes them because that is where he finds the images and sounds that move him. And also I think he likes the way this pushes him technically. He loves to invent ways of shooting to meet each situation."

For Dyekjær, Kossakovsky's initial presentation, with its aim of provoking a more immediate, emotion-driven response to water's slippery substance, was irresistible: "I could see this was a nature film that was not going to be like a nature film," she says. "Victor creates experiences that speak to your gut and heart, not your head. And what I love is that this film lets you feel the waters in the world and inside your own body. At the same time, I feel Victor is giving us a different kind of insight into where the world is heading if we don't start acting and if we don't give our attention to water in a very profound way."

Dyekjær likens how Kossakovsky approached the fluid nature of water to how she tries to weather the never-ending shifts of her teenage daughters. "I felt I could completely relate metaphorically to how Victor tries to get his hands around water, this very elusive force. It is a lot like trying to handle a teenager, where you know things are going to go up and down and there are constant waves of emotion. Victor is so sensitive; he can work beautifully with this kind of character. He reveals water to be so many things — beautiful, funny and disturbing."

Likewise, Barnes was drawn to the experiential nature of Kossakovsky's work, to how his images could at one moment hypnotize and charm and the next leave you frightened or uneasy. "Victor creates an experience that you enter — and one that also enters you," she describes. "You're not a passive spectator of Victor's films. He asks you to actively participate in something that is emotional and personal and reaches you on another level. His films are about the being of *being*."

Barnes, too, felt this could be a new way to engage audiences with the climate change emergency, though humans play only a supporting — and mostly vulnerable — role in the film, often at water's mercy. "When you watch *Aquarela*, I think you can no longer feel separate from these tremendous natural forces around us," she says.

She continues, "Victor draws you into a different frame of seeing with his visual poetry and then he finds ways to unsettle, destabilize and crack things open — and that's exactly what art

should do. He never mentions climate change but you experience places that are being altered by it, and that has a unique impact. Logic only gets you so far, but Victor creates room for people to enter into this experience in their own way and bring their own experiences and emotional reactions to it. When that happens, an experience tends to linger and stay with you.”

As the producers began the quixotic search for financing, they were bolstered again when Participant Media joined the team, bringing their deep experience in documentary production and distribution, along with their added legacy of social impact. “When we met with Participant, they knew it would be an unpredictable process but they said, ‘Let’s just do it.’ It was a brave decision, and we are all so grateful to be working with them,” says Dyekjær.

Diane Weyermann, President of Documentary Film and Television for Participant Media, has known Kossakovsky for 20 years, but the chance to work with him on a film about water was especially exciting to her. “He works in his own universe,” she muses, “but I knew whatever Victor did with the concept of water was going to be something off the charts and a totally different kind of experience for people.”

Weyermann sees the film in alignment with Participant’s vow to produce entertainment that inspires social change, if not quite in the same way a more conventional doc would. “*Aquarela* is, at the end of the day, an engagement with the extraordinary power of nature — with beauty, but also with the fury of a natural world that will survive longer than we humans. I call it a nature revenge story. The imagery evokes a timeless quality of stories like *The Old Man and the Sea* and *Moby Dick*, where nature is a defiant adversary to humans.”

She continues, “Part of the allure of the film is this feeling you get from it: that human beings are really tiny and water is this massive powerhouse that fills the screen. Along with the images, the incredible sound puts you in the middle of everything, and once you are there, it works on you at a whole other level. I think it provokes a lot of questions about our own role in nature’s fury and about the need for us to approach nature with a deeper reverence for what part we play. It might be the polar opposite of a documentary that tries to understand the science and the politics of water, but I think both kinds of stories are equally important now.”

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As Kossakovsky began thinking about water — submersing himself as it were — he could not escape thinking about form — both all the ways that water gives form to feelings that are hard to articulate verbally and about the form of the film itself. He grappled with how best to give voice to a lead character lacking a consciousness that we humans can readily understand.

“Whenever a filmmaker approaches a subject, I think you have to ask yourself, ‘Are you ready to do it in a unique way?’ This I believe has been lost a little bit in cinema today,” Kossakovsky says. “This is another reason why I wanted to take on *Aquarela* — as a challenge not just technically but also dramatically, cinematically emotionally and spiritually.”

Flux became a driving idea as the film got under way. “One thing is that water is never boring,” the director says. “It is always saying something new and it’s always surprising you. Water has all kinds of colors, shapes, and sounds. It can be one thing and become something else. This is also something that cinema can do as no other form can: show and explore states of change.”

Still, the intuitive approach meant no one, including the director himself, knew exactly what they were getting into — so keeping the production on track was a balancing act the producers had to learn by trial and error.

Says Weyermann: “Victor doesn’t map anything out, but what he does is not random, either. He crystallizes what he sees and is able to follow that to create a narrative that no one else can see until the film is finished.”

Adds Reques, “With Victor, the more you push him, the less you get. You have to come from a place where he doesn’t feel his creativity is being inhibited. He doesn’t follow structure, budgets, logistics, but you can count on him to bring all his gifts and his intuition. Really, Victor and water are the same. So those of us around him had to be the container.”

The desire to find a form that could mirror water is what led Kossakovsky to film *Aquarela* in a format that is, for all intents and purposes, still on the horizon: 96 frames-per-second (fps). Though projection of 96 fps is still in the earliest, undeveloped stages, Kossakovsky hopes that projection technology will soon catch up to filmmakers who want to experiment with it.

The standard movie to which our eyes are habituated is 24 fps. This speed is derived from the early days of cinematic experimentation, when people realized that if you fall below 16 fps, the illusion of motion ceases entirely. Even at 18 fps, motion is stilted enough to feel comical. At 24 fps, there is a closer semblance to natural motion — yet, with just enough flicker to feel a little fantastical, a show that belongs to the realm of magic rather than the completely real. However, the advent of digital technology, which theoretically can support frame rates up to the speed of light, has led some to question why 24 fps has remained the standard — and to wonder what the sharper, smoother, more life-like motion of higher frame rates might reveal. A few recent films, such as Peter Jackson’s *The Hobbit*, have been shot at 48 fps to both excitement and controversy.

For Kossakovsky, the time to push frame rates forward has come. “I simply believe that it’s time to change,” he says. “We’ve had 100 years of 24 frames per second. In that time, we’ve been through many changes in cinema — color appeared, sound appeared, even 3D appeared, and now it’s time to change the frame rate. We have to go for 96 or even 120.”

*Aquarela*, in particular, seemed to Kossakovsky to call out for a higher frame rate. Often operating the camera himself, along with cinematographer Ben Bernhard (*Varicella*, which was also captured at 48 fps), he was constantly searching for ways to show water from water’s POV.

“96 was so important for this project because water is *continuous* and I feel you really cannot divide it into 24,” Kossakovsky explains. “At the same time, 96 allows you to see a single rain drop in a way you are not expecting. What was most essential to me about 96 is that it can change the perception. In 96 you can put the camera inches from a sheet of ice and move it very, very fast and you will not feel bumpy and you won’t see stroboscoping. Actually, you will feel like you are flying high above the ice. This is such a huge tool to trick your perception and change your idea of scale. This is the potential of 96.”

Says Barnes, “We’re so used to seeing things at 24 fps that Victor wanted to seek out a different kind of experience. I think part of what higher frame rates can achieve is to remind you that so much of what you see is a matter of perspective.”

While Kossakovsky was looking ahead technologically in *Aquarela*, he was also turning his gaze back to the avant-garde directors of the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. In one of cinema's most creative phases, filmmakers began experimenting with, as Kossakovsky says, "how to extract cinema from subjects that you could not describe any other way than by watching them in motion." It was a time of films that were playful, investigational, suffused with the abstract shapes of dream imagery and intended to startle and up-end the status quo.

He was particularly influenced by the 1929 documentary *Rain*, directed by Joris Ivens and Mannus Franken. Shot over many months, this 12-minute work, at once rhythmic, poetic and comedic, re-created the lived experience of moving through a rainstorm erupting over Amsterdam. "It's a film you cannot describe or explain. You just have to watch it," says Kossakovsky. "This is what defines cinema."

But a 12-minute film is quite a different enterprise from a full-length feature. "Poetic films have historically always been short form," Kossakovsky points out, noting this was among the big challenges he faced. "That is why I invite the audience into *Aquarela* with what looks like traditional storytelling, but by minute 15, I am grabbing them and putting them inside the pure power of water."

Water may not have conventional motivation but it does have cycles rife with dramatic structure. "Water cannot have a human narrative, but it has its own narrative," Kossakovsky describes. "Water is always changing. Water is flying up into the sky, becoming clouds and then reappearing as a lake. It's an unbelievable creature and when you know this creature, you respect its destructive power and are mystified by its beauty."

While preparing to shoot, Kossakovsky consulted with a roster of scientists and environmental leaders to better comprehend his subject. But he chose not to film any or include any factual data in his film. Instead, he left behind all that he learned and headed into production trying to cultivate a sense of open *unknowing*, of questing without answers.

"The very first line I wrote when I started thinking about *Aquarela* was a quote from Isaac Newton," Kossakovsky explains. "He said, 'What we know is a drop and what we don't know is an ocean.' This was for me the starting point of how to follow water. I said I will not write a script. I will just follow water the way it goes."

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As much as Kossakovsky's creative spirit exhilarated the producers, the logistics of actually getting *Aquarela* off the ground — and around the globe — were in Reques' words, "a producer's ultimate nightmare." Just transporting thousands of pounds worth of equipment from one remote outpost of the planet to another was a massive, tangled task — and once the crew and gear arrived at each location, the problem-solving was just beginning. Divers and sea captains had to be wrangled, wilderness camps had to be established and drones and helicopters had to be at the ready.

Meanwhile, there were never-ending hazards. Shooting among icebergs spewing truck-sized chunks of ice, riding the skyscraper waves of the open ocean, sneaking under towering waterfalls and driving through the eye of Hurricane Irma, the crew faced everything from motion sickness to bone-chilling temperatures to winds that could whip an entire location away in the blink of an eye. "We knew we could die at almost every minute," says Kossakovsky. "But this is an important side of water. It can kill a human being easily."

For Reques, who accompanied Kossakovsky on location, the best attitude was to have faith that the water would allow them safe passage. “Water commands, it does not ask — and water, of course, is also the enemy of equipment,” she emphasizes. “So we had to put ourselves in the hands of the water and trust that it would be all right. Things went wrong but given the extreme level of complexity we faced, we had truly very few incidents.”

Dyckjær adds, “There was not one location that was easy on this film... Luckily, we had so many people who worked their butts off to shoot the impossible.”

Morale also remained high because the footage coming in was so unusual. “Some of what you see looks as if it is CGI, but every frame of the film is real,” notes Weyermann. “Part of the fun of *Aquarela* is imagining how Victor and his team managed to get some of those shots. Victor loves creative problem-solving and he invented so many things for this film.”

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*Aquarela* opens on a landscape that immediately ignites the imagination. This is Siberia’s Lake Baikal, which is 395 miles long, over a mile deep and 25 million years old — the world’s oldest and deepest fresh water lake. (To give some perspective, the lake is so vast its volume is equal to all of the United States’ Great Lakes combined.) Kossakovsky was drawn here at first because of the lake’s clean, clear waters, which for centuries have drawn artists, shamans and scientists to peer into its fish-laden depths.

He also was drawn to the lake’s cracks — the spectacular fissuring of the ice that occurs each year when the temperature shifts accompanied by a thunderous cacophony of sound. “People come from all around the world to hear the ice crack in Lake Baikal,” notes Barnes. “Victor thought it could be an amazing visual and sonic experience.”

But he discovered something very different there, something that changed the tenor of the film right away. Rapidly changing temperatures have shifted Lake Baikal’s seasons in radical ways. Ice thaws are coming earlier and faster and the decreased thickness of the ice has, in turn, led to an increasing number of sunken cars and even tragic drownings.

Although it’s illegal to drive on frozen Lake Baikal without a permit, it has long been done for both adventure and especially for convenience. It has always involved some risk — though the ice in places is meters thick, the ice sheet can be highly deceptive and you can hit a thinner patch with little warning — but is becoming even more so to locals’ dismay.

Soon after arriving, the crew unforeseeably witnessed a tragedy unfold. It began when Kossakovsky came upon some locals using their own home-grown method of hauling up sodden SUV’s submerged below the frozen surface — utilizing a simple, but ingenious, wooden gear screwed into the ice. “We suddenly saw these strange people who were searching for something, and this is when we realized they were searching for cars. When we began to film this search, we saw suddenly another car coming. We tried to scream ‘stop, stop!’ but they were too far away to hear,” Kossakovsky remembers. “Local people told us normally they have ice two to three weeks longer to drive on the ice so no one was expecting this.”

Faced with such intense footage, Kossakovsky searched his soul for the most ethical response. “At first I didn’t want to use this footage, but then I realized that maybe it’s my duty to

show what life has given me. This is a huge lesson for all of us to take water seriously. Water is not a joke,” he warns.

As Kossakovsky was filming on Lake Baikal, he intuited that the next stop on the journey would have to be Greenland, where water take on one of its most enchanting forms — as colossal icebergs moving like living sculpture through pristine bays.

Kossakovsky hoped to give icebergs a voice they have never had on film. His first idea was to literally ride an iceberg. He thought he might mount a camera directly onto one of these watery mountains and let it capture whatever unfolded on its ride. “But then we realized icebergs can turn upside down and they don’t warn you one minute before — they just do it because 90 percent of an iceberg is below water and they can tip quite easily,” the director explains. “So then we started thinking about another way we might achieve the iceberg’s point of view.”

This led to a lot of tricky camerawork, using the *Polski Hak*, a 100-foot expedition schooner as a home base, dodging tumbling ice the whole way. “In every film, I try to make technical decisions such that even other cameramen will wonder how I did certain things,” Kossakovsky explains. “I think in *Aquarela*, we have filmed icebergs from angles and positions no one has seen, including scientists.”

Sound was equally vital, as it would be throughout the film as Russian sound designer Aleksandr Dudarev recorded a symphony of rushing, thundering, crashing, trickling, popping and crackling. “Even more than the picture, what I love about Greenland is the amazing sound of the icebergs calving. There is nothing else like it and it really brings you into the power of these huge ice forms,” says Deckert.

In Greenland, the film crew disembarked in the small seasonal settlement known as Port Victor. After filming around the Egi (meaning *the edge*) Glacier — a 200-meter tall frozen wall where ice boulders colliding with the sea can cause tidal waves — they moved on through Disko Bay to the Torssuqtaq Fjord and Inuit village of Saqqaaq (meaning *sunny side*).

Greenland had a profound impact on the crew, who were charmed to make their daily tea from glacier melts offering 10,000-year-old water. “The icebergs just hit you in the gut,” says Sigrid Dyekjær. “I thought if this guy can capture just one-one-hundredth of what I’m seeing here in Greenland, and this feeling inside me, this is going to be incredible. And, of course, Victor did more than that. He captured it in ways you could not have imagined.”

As his mind moved with the icebergs, Kossakovsky now saw that his next stop had to be the ocean, which is what led the crew to take hazard-filled trans-Atlantic crossing on the *Polski Hak* from Cascais, Portugal to Nuuk, Greenland. “When we saw this calving iceberg flying so fast, I said, ‘OK we have to film the ocean next,’” Kossakovsky explains.

The three-week journey was a crucible for the crew, as co-skippers Hayat Mokhenache (who has made 11 ocean crossings) and Peter Madej (who has made 20 ocean crossings) navigated through 30-foot waves and 40-knot winds in nerve-rattling weather. “Crossing the Atlantic was the most horrifying experience for me,” confesses Reques. “Everyone was so sick. I don’t know how we survived. We had to stop in the Azores to avoid a huge approaching storm and every minute of it was so difficult. But Victor knew what he wanted and he was determined to get it.”

What he wanted was to capture the sea from a view opposite to how it's usually seen: in absolutely smooth motion, without the pitch-and-roll of a camera clearly shooting from a rocking boat. To do so, he utilized a piece of technology known as the Perfect Horizon camera stabilization system, a winner of the Motion Picture Arts & Sciences' Scientific and Engineering Award, which, in conjunction with other inventive strategies, was able to eliminate any sense of vibration. Says Reques, "The challenge for Victor was always how to see water from the point of view of the sea, not the boat. He needed to let the sea tell her own story. The Perfect Horizon system was exactly what Victor needed to get those stable shots."

Eventually, the film wended its way to the Americas, with Kossakovsky's team arriving in California just as the Oroville Dam overflowed, flooding communities downstream, then heading to Miami as the streets were rendered surreal by 2017's Hurricane Irma. The film would ultimately conclude in perhaps the production's most breathtaking setting — Venezuela's Canaima National Park, home to the world's tallest continuous waterfall, Angel Falls, with a plunge of 2,368 feet.

Nestled in an isolated patch of jungle, Angel Falls was once a global tourist destination. But due to the volatile economic and political situation in Venezuela, fewer people see it today. Despite the challenges, Kossakovsky succeeded to capture it in his own typically unconventional way.

The hazardous rapids on the approach made Reques so nervous that she stayed behind. "Victor naturally jumped at the idea, but for me it was too much," she relates. "I felt I couldn't bring my fear to the team. My instinct was to protect them, but I knew fear is not what they needed."

Intoxicated by the beauty — and maybe a bit by the risks — Kossakovsky devised a way to capture extraordinary footage at the waterfall that became a natural conclusion to the film.

Says Reques, "Those shots still give me goose bumps every time I see them, because it's just so real, there are no special effects, it just happened like that. I still look at it and want to cry. To me, that beautiful rainbow summarizes the whole film — because here you have all the colors, all the watercolors, and that is *Aquarela*."

Weyermann recalls seeing that scene for the first time: "It felt to me like a painting from Genesis, that pure picture of nature with no humans. You get a physical reaction from it and it seems to sum up so much of what the movie is about."

\* \* \*

When the shoot ended, the storytelling jumped into another gear as Kossakovsky entered the editing room. He joined with co-editor Molly Malene Stensgaard, known for her long collaboration on fiction films with Danish director Lars Von Trier, and his assistant director Ainara Vera (director of *See You Tomorrow, God Willing!* which premiered at IDFA in 2017).

As he does in the field, Kossakovsky takes an intuitive approach to editing. "The material dictates the story for Victor, which is a different way of thinking," says Reques. "That is why it was interesting to pair him with Molly, who comes from a fiction film background. Editing is a big deal for Victor. He works tirelessly until he's satisfied, and he comes at it from an emotional perspective — the material has to be deeply moving to him."

While natural sound takes a front seat, music was always essential to Kossakovsky's vision for *Aquarela*. But he was in search of a rhythm and melody he could not even imagine at first. Having rejected the idea of a lush orchestral score, he went on a quest to find something different. After plowing through composers' work from every genre, Kossakovsky finally heard the sound he felt matched with water: that of Finnish composer and cellist Eicca Toppinen and his so-called "cello-metal" band, Apocalyptica. Melding classical music with heavy-metal rock, Apocalyptica forges the elegance of the former with the shredding fury of the latter. "This was the music that had the most emotional resonance with water for Victor," says Reques.

Adds Weyermann, "As usual with Victor, he went against the grain with the music and went to a very different place than you expect. Apocalyptica's music is aggressive and dissonant yet also lyrical and moving. It's not minimal, but it's also not orchestral. Victor uses the music sparingly but always with a purpose, always reinforcing the ferocity of nature."

The finished cut of the film took all of the producers by surprise with its emotional resonance and they hope audiences will approach this different kind of experience with an open mind. Says Reques, "Like any artwork, it is like something alive and every person who encounters it can interpret it in its own way. It comes from a place beyond the rational mind that you can't describe."

Summarizes Dyekjær, "Victor has given us a prism that allows us to see in a different way. I encourage people to come to this movie ready to experience something new and then to seek out more of nature and to really feel it in the body."

Barnes concludes, "The film never touches on climate change or water politics but the urgency is there, implicit in every frame and in what you feel. He's found a way of allowing people to enter the natural world in a very personal, poetic way that lets you feel more acutely the situation the planet is in."

Deckert is also excited to have more audiences exposed to Kossakovsky's work. "Victor has always made movies with a voice that is so different from anyone else. But starting with *Vivan Las Antipodas!* and now with *Aquarela*, he also has been moving more into the world. He still lets a film find him, but he's going out on a wider search for his films and we hope more audiences around the world will discover him. This is the kind of film that you can't ever describe completely. It's a film everyone has to experience for themselves."

Adds Weyermann, "There are so many images you can't forget: the horse in the water is like something out of Tarkovsky, and the massive waves cresting while humans are dwarfed feels almost literary. The cumulative effect of watching and taking in these cinematic scenes along with the sound and the music gives you an incredible kind of rush. It's pure cinema."

As Kossakovsky completed *Aquarela*, he remained as tantalized by water as he had going into it. He notes that this is part of what continues to move him. "At the end of the filming, I came to a very strange conclusion," he says. "At the beginning of the film, I had written down the Isaac Newton quote saying that what we know is a drop and what we don't know is an ocean. But after talking to scientists and studying water myself and after this entire experience I have had with water, I came to realize we don't even know a drop. We know even less than that."

This is how Kossakovsky likes it. To not know is an opportunity for both humility and awe. His movie became an expression of veneration for an element that is persistently mysterious — but also urgently essential to the future dreams of humankind.

“We believe we are the most important thing in the world, but in fact we cannot survive without water for more than one week,” concludes Kossakovsky. “I don’t want us to go back to pre-technological times, but we have to return to see our own position within the natural world. I hope when you experience in this different way the non-stop power of a calving iceberg or 30-meter waves, you will realize the ocean has been moving like this for millions of years with a power and a life that we cannot understand. When you awaken to this, maybe you will also awaken to the stakes of not respecting such a power.”

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### ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS

**Victor Kossakovsky (Director/Writer/Cinematographer/Editor)** is an innovative documentary filmmaker whose 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 at 1978. He studied screenwriting and directing at Moscow HCSF at 1986-1988. In 1989 he directed his first feature *Losev* and then in 1992 his most famous 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.

In many of his films, as with *Aquarela*, Kossakovsky has served simultaneously as director, editor, cinematographer and writer. He continues to serve as a teacher and mentor to aspiring filmmakers and documentarians globally.

Victor Kossakovsky was born in Saint Petersburg (Leningrad at the time) on July 19, 1961.

**Aimara Reques (Producer)** is an award-winning producer who has over 30 years of experience in the film industry. As a student at the University of Venezuela, Reques was privileged to begin her career working alongside established director Pablo De La Barra. Her first documentary production experience was about a unique indigenous community, deep within the Amazon. The community was so inspirational in its wisdom and vision that it continues to inspire Reques today.

Reques founded Aconite Productions in 2010 with a passion to produce ambitious and well-crafted documentaries on important international stories. Since then, she has collaborated with a number of renowned directors and producers from both the UK and abroad.

She is a winner of two BAFTA Scotland Awards; a Fox Searchlight Award and an Amnesty International Media Award and has produced films for UK TV channels as well as international co-productions for broadcast and theatrical releases.

**Heino Deckert (Producer)** has studied law in Berlin and was a student at the German Film and TV Academy Berlin (DFFB). Upon graduating in 1991 he founded the production company, Ma.ja.de. Filmproduktions GmbH.

Deckert meanwhile produced more than 100 award-winning documentaries for Ma.ja.de. Filmproduktion. His co-production *Rabbit á la Berlin* by Bartek Konopka was nominated for an Academy Award® in 2010. He previously produced Kossakovsky's *¡Vivan Las Antipodas!*, which was the opening film of the Venice Film Festival in 2011. In 2013 *Song From the Forest* by Michael Obert won the main award of the International Amsterdam Film Festival (IDFA). Decker recently produced Ai Weiwei's award-winning *Human Flow*.

The catalogue of his sales company Deckert Distribution includes titles such as the Emmy Award winner *Miners Shot Down* (2015) and *No Burqas Behind Bars* (2014) and *The 3 Rooms of Melancholia*, as well as most of the documentaries of Sergej Loznitsa.

In 2005, Deckert founded Ma.ja.de. Fiction and produced his first fiction film with documentary filmmakers Peter Brosens and Jessica Woodworth. The film, *Khadak*, premiered in Venice 2006 and won the Lion of the Future. This was followed by Brosens and Woodworth's *Altiplano*, which premiered in Cannes 2009. The first fiction film project from the documentary filmmaker Sergej Loznitsa *My Joy* had its premiere in the Cannes Competition 2010. The film was shortlisted for the European Film Awards and received major awards at several international festivals. Loznitsa's second fiction film, *In the Fog*, was also produced by Deckert and had its premiere in the competition in Cannes 2012, winning the Fipresci Award for Best Film in the main competition. In 2016, Deckert co-produced the children's film *Hotel Große L*. In 2017 he will produce the fiction film *Adam & Evelyn*, from first-time director Andreas Goldstein and the new film from Loznitsa, *Donbass*.

**Sigrid Dyekjær (Producer)** has produced over 20 documentary films during the last 16 years, among them *Ai Weiwei – The Fake Case* by Andreas Johnsen (winner of the film critics' award in Denmark, the Bodil, and nominee at IDFA's feature length competition in 2013). She also produced *Free the Mind* by Phie Ambo and *A Normal Life* by Mikala Krogh (winner of the Audience Award at CPH:DOX), and was executive producer on *Ballroom Dancer* (winner of Nordic Panorama 2012 and Best Documentary Film at Raindance 2012). Her other films include *The Good Life*, *The Monastery*, *Mechanical Love* and *Cairo Garbage*.

Dyekjær is one of the most experienced producers in Denmark when it comes to financing and production of both national and international documentary films. In 2015 she was awarded with The Ib Award, given by the Danish directors to honor the best producer in the Danish film industry. She teaches at the National Film School of Denmark and at DOK Incubator, an initiative supported by Media, and she also holds master class lectures at film schools around the world and courses in documentary filmmaking.

In 2014 she produced both Mikala Krogh's film *The Newsroom - Off The Record* about the workings of a major Danish newspaper, and Oscar-nominee Hanna Polak's *Something Better To Come*. For this she was nominated at The Producers Guild of America Awards 2016 for Outstanding Producer of Documentary.

**Jeff Skoll (Executive Producer)** is an entrepreneur devoted to creating a sustainable world of peace and prosperity. Over the course of nearly two decades, Skoll has created an innovative portfolio of philanthropic and commercial enterprises, each a distinctive catalyst for changing the issues that most affect the survival and thriving of humanity – including climate change. This portfolio includes the Skoll Foundation, Participant Media, Skoll Global Threats Fund, Capricorn Investment Group, and new ventures – all coordinated under the Jeff Skoll Group umbrella.

Skoll's entrepreneurial approach is unique: driving large-scale, permanent social impact by investing in a range of efforts that integrate powerful stories, data, capital markets, technology, partnerships, and organized learning networks. Operating independently from one another yet deeply connected through shared mission, Skoll's organizations galvanize public will, policy, and mobilize critical resources that accelerate the pace and depth of change.

Inspired by the belief that a story well told can change the world, Jeff founded Participant Media in 2004. Participant Media is the world's leading entertainment company focused on social impact. Participant has produced more than 80 feature-length narrative and documentary films. These films collectively have garnered 56 Academy Award® nominations and 12 wins, including Best Picture for *Spotlight*.

Companion campaigns run by Participant have shaped consumers' beliefs and actions, and in some cases have been instrumental in changing national and international policies working hand-in-hand with non-profit partners.

As the first full time employee and President of eBay, Skoll experienced firsthand the power of combining entrepreneurship, technology, and trust in people. His work today embodies those critical lessons learned from eBay. All of Skoll's organizations rely on the premise that people are basically good, and that if good people are given the opportunity to do the right thing, they will.

**Diane Weyermann (Executive Producer)** is President of Documentary Film and Television of Participant Media, a company dedicated to entertainment that inspires and compels social change. In addition to the upcoming *Far From The Tree*, *Kailash*, *RBG* and *America To Me*, Participant's recent documentary projects include *Human Flow*, *An Inconvenient Sequel: Truth To Power*, *The Music of Strangers: Yo Ma and the Silk Road Ensemble* and *Zero Days*. Previous releases include the Oscar®-winning films, *CITIZENFOUR* and *An Inconvenient Truth*, the Emmy®-winning *Food, Inc.*, and Emmy®-nominated *The Great Invisible*.

Prior to joining Participant in 2005, Weyermann was the director of the Sundance Institute's Documentary Film Program. During her tenure at Sundance, she was responsible for the Sundance Documentary Fund, a program supporting documentary films dealing with contemporary human rights, social justice, civil liberties, and freedom of expression from around the world.

Before her time at Sundance, Weyermann was the director of the Open Society Institute New York's Arts and Culture Program where she launched the Soros Documentary Fund (which later became the Sundance Documentary Fund).

**Joslyn Barnes (Co-Producer)** is a writer and producer. Among the films Barnes has been involved with producing since co-founding Louverture Films with actor Danny Glover are: César-nominated *Bamako*, Sundance Grand Jury Prize winner and Oscar nominee *Trouble The Water*; the international cult hit *Black Power Mixtape 1967-1975*, Sundance Grand Jury Prize, Grierson and Peabody winner *The House I Live In*; the Berlinale award-winner *Concerning Violence*, the 2010 Cannes Palme d'Or winner *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* by Apichatpong Weerasethakul and his recent *Cemetery of Splendour*, Deepak Rauniyar's *White Sun*, Lucrecia Martel's multiple award winner *ZAMA*, and the 2018 Oscar nominated *Strong Island* by Yance Ford.

Forthcoming films include the 2018 Sundance Special Jury Prize winner RaMell Ross' *Hale County This Morning, This Evening*, Göran Hugo Olsson's *That Summer*, and James Longley's *Angels Are Made Of*

*Light*. Barnes also wrote and directed the short film *Prana* for CinéTévé France as part of an internationally distributed series of 30 short films to promote awareness of environmental issues. In 2017, Barnes was the recipient of both the Cinereach Producer Award and the Sundance Institute/Amazon Studios Producer Award. In 2018, she was nominated for an Academy Award for Documentary Feature.

**Molly Malene Stensgaard (Co-Editor)** was born in Copenhagen, where she graduated in film editing from the prestigious Danish Film School. Her career is marked by a long collaboration with her fellow-countryman Lars von Trier. She has work on almost all of his projects, starting with the television series *The Kingdom* and continuing through such award-winning films as *The Idiots*, *Dancer In The Dark*, *Dogville*, *Manderley*, *The Boss Of It All*, *Melancholia* and the upcoming *House That Jack Built*.

**Ainara Vera (First Assistant Director, Co-Editor)** was born in Pamplona and graduated from the University of Navarre with a degree in Audiovisual Communication. After receiving a scholarship for young artists, she received a Master's Degree in Creation Documentary Filmmaking at Pompeu Fabra University. Along with 32 students and Victor Kossakovsky she co-directed *Demonstration*, which premiered at IDFA. Her first documentary short, *Sertres*, premiered in Locarno. She recently directed the documentary *See You Tomorrow, God Willing!* about a convent of 17 Franciscan nun all in their 80s.

**Eicca Toppinen (Music)** is a cellist, composer and producer from Helsinki, Finland. He founded the cellometal-band APOCALYPTICA, which has released eight studio albums featuring numerous cello-based instrumentals along with some vocal-based songs, with millions of records sold and sold-out shows around the world.

## CREDITS

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| cranes                | TRANSGRUA<br>IHOR SOSNA<br>ALBERTO COSTA                                                                                                                                                                                |
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| film insurance          | AARCO AGENTE DE SEGUROS Y<br>FIANZAS SA DE CV |

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|                        |                                                                               |
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| aqua coma              | COMPOSED AND PERFORMED BY EICCA TOPPINEN<br>PUBLISHED BY FREE HAND PUBLISHING |
| at the gates of manala | COMPOSED AND PERFORMED BY APOCALYPTICA<br>PUBLISHED BY HARMAGEDDON PUBLISHING |
| i iii v seed of chaos  | COMPOSED AND PERFORMED BY APOCALYPTICA                                        |

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eh, nastasya! (russian folk song) BALALAIKA PERFORMANCE AND  
ARRANGEMENT BY EUGENIY SMIRNOV

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  - producer MAYA SANBAR
  
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