

# TRUST, FÖRTROENDE!

Keywords for  
a successful  
co-production

By Martin Delisle

**H**OT DOCS 2013 HOSTED the international premiere of an impressive Canadian-Swedish (80% - 20%) co-production, *Forest of the Dancing Spirits*. Making the film was quite a feat in itself. Shot in the jungle of the Congo Basin, the second largest forest in the world, it shows the daily life of the Mbenga or Aka, nomadic pygmies who live by hunting and gathering.

It took a good deal of tenacity on the part of its Swedish producer-director, Linda Västrik, and a lot of trust and faith in her talent and abilities for EyeSteelFilm to get involved and agree to co-produce this \$1.5-million documentary that was 13 years in the making. But, obviously, it was worth the wait, as both parties testify and as the finished film demonstrates.

Linda Västrik first became interested in the Aka people through their music, which was introduced to her by an ethnographer friend. She went to the region four times: three times to shoot—twice over periods of four months, one back-and-forth trip for research—and one last time for two weeks, while working on translations for the film.

The first time, after four months in the jungle, she had to return to Sweden because she was unaccustomed to eating meat and fell sick as a result of the Aka people's diet. She learned to eat meat for a month and went back and stayed until April 2003, doing research and living with the Aka, befriending them and earning their trust. During this time Västrik neither filmed nor photographed the Aka. The first trip was financed through a grant she received from Sweden's Foundation for the Culture of the Future.

Financing the film turned out to be quite a challenge. Over the years, Västrik had to get by without a regular income, which she asserts caused some hardship for her family and friends. When she approached the Swedish funding agencies for the first time, Västrik was told that she was crazy. After all, they pointed out, she was asking

for support to go into one of the most corrupt countries of the world in a civil war zone with a lot of weapons around and where slavery is still common practice.

But she already loved the Aka and absolutely wanted to make a film that would allow audiences to identify with them. Västrik was so persuasive that she finally got the Swedish Film Institute, SVT (Swedish Television) and the Swedish Arts Grants Committee to commit some money for her first shoot. But she was forced to take great financial risks because she would receive the money only once she showed enough film work to prove that she could make a feature documentary out of her stories of the Aka tribe.

In 2005, Västrik came back with convincing footage from what she calls her “development shooting” and got the money promised to her. She proceeded to produce a demo reel and then approached the Swedish funding agencies with the reel and a budget. The budget was big enough that she was advised to pitch the project as an international co-production.

She approached Hot Docs in 2008 to pitch the project there, but when she wasn't accepted for the Doc Forum, she decided to take a chance and go to Toronto anyway.

Västrik had heard of EyeSteelFilm—about the seriousness of the people working there—and she had seen their films. Through director Omar Majeed, whose film *Taqwacore: The Birth of Punk Islam* was produced by EyeSteelFilm, she was able to get a trailer to Mila Aung-Thwin, the company's co-CEO. Aung-Thwin found the demo “stunning” and loved the angle that Västrik had chosen, showing how the Aka people were condescending toward her. This led to a fruitful meeting between Aung-Thwin and Bob Moore from EyeSteelFilm and Västrik. Aung-Thwin told *POV* that he “thought she was a brave and honest storyteller, and super interesting.” At the time, he had no



ALL IMAGES COURTESY EYESTEELFILM



From left: Director Linda Västrik on location; images from *Forest of the Dancing Spirits* (dir. Linda Västrik, 2013)

idea if she would make a good business partner, but, according to him, “that’s usually a secondary consideration if you like someone.”

Bob Moore added that they had had discussions with some of Västrik’s financial partners in Sweden about working with her as a partner. What came out was that she was considered absolutely committed to her craft and, thus, that there was no chance the film would not eventually be made. Furthermore, Västrik had already clearly convinced a lot of people to commit relatively important investments in her project. As Moore said: “This really reinforced the more vague but certainly tangible sense we had that she was someone really special, someone who, by combining her obvious creativity with the endless dedication required for [this] type of project, would inevitably come back with a potentially great film.”

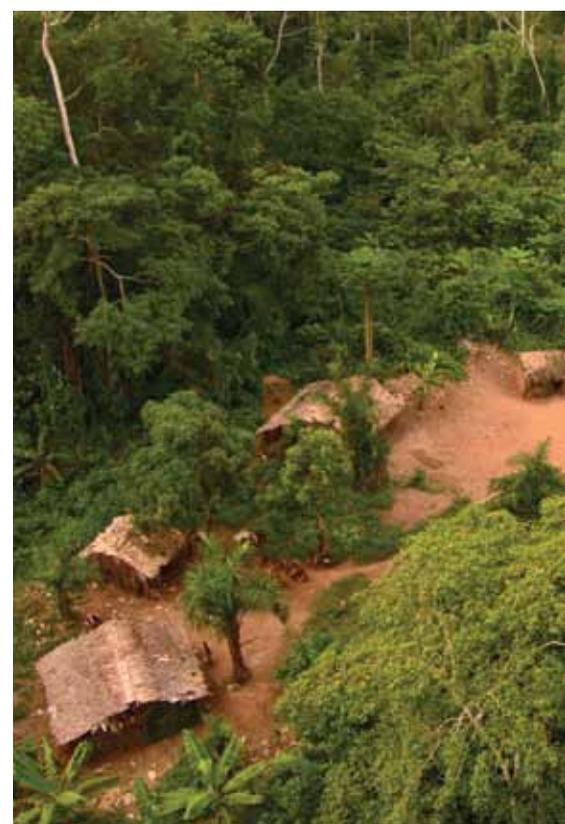
From the Swedish point of view, the funding agencies realized after meeting with Aung-Thwin that having EyeSteelFilm as a co-producer was a major advantage. The total European funding of about \$1.2-million came from the following sources: Film i Väst (a Swedish regional film centre), Swedish Film Institute, SVT, Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation and Nordisk Film & TV Fund, Swedish Arts Grants Committee, Sweden’s Foundation for the Culture of the Future and Linda Västrik Filmproduktion AB.

Linda Västrik goes out of her way to point out how trust really made a difference in her relationship with the people at EyeSteelFilm. She claims that she is good on location, filming people and developing a very close, if not intimate, rapport with them. But, she is not really keen on writing a manuscript or a treatment before shooting. This is not her concept of making a documentary. So, her Canadian partners had to trust that she would make a good film. It never became an issue with EyeSteelFilm, who have vast experience in producing exactly that type of documentary.

Logistically, the project presented great challenges. The jungle where the Aka live and Västrik shot was in 900,000 hectares of swamp without roads. The distance between the base camp and the nearest airport was three days and three nights by motorboat down the Congo River, and from there, an eight-hour walk through the jungle. There was up to two tons of equipment to carry and it took about 60 locals to do it. Shooting for periods of four months at a time took a serious toll on the small crews, who were under pressure to deliver high-quality work. The film crew had no protection from abuse or violence in a war zone. Fear was constant; they felt homesick and were fed up with living in cramped quarters without any privacy. They fought among themselves and went home with malaria.

Västrik described the conditions like this: “You are totally dependent on the people you have around you. You know that your extremely demanding boss [herself] will not be able to save you if something goes wrong. The customs of the Aka that you depend upon are very far from yours, so if you want to gain their trust you have to adapt, which is very difficult. This leads city people to go into an emotional panic stage and they act crazy. In Swedish it is called “forest-madness.” According to Aung-Thwin, Västrik seemed to be the only one impervious to the rigours of the jungle.

There was no electricity, so the film was shot in S16 with an Arri SR2. Given that it was a mechanical camera, it was still possible to repair it when the need arose, even in the jungle, but it meant speaking to an Arriflex technician in Sweden. But telephoning from the jungle was another hardship: appointments had to be made, since Västrik had to find an open space with no trees to get good enough reception—sometimes this meant walking a great distance. The lack of electricity also created a major concern about the film stock, particularly once it was exposed.



ALL IMAGES COURTESY EYESTEELFILM

As if surviving the heat and humidity of the jungle were not enough, some of the footage was damaged after being passed through an X-ray machine in a French airport. In the end and with the assistance of some modern technology, these problems were resolved relatively inexpensively and the footage could be used. Had this not been the case, EyeSteelFilm might have suffered a financial loss of some \$60,000.

At the time, the incident put the trust between Linda Västrik and EyeSteelFilm to the test. Aung-Thwin had to inform the Swedish director about the damaged footage. She was on location at the time. Västrik said that she became so infuriated by the situation that she funnelled all her anger and frustration to Aung-Thwin over the phone from the jungle. Fortunately, the co-production was never truly in danger because of the bond of trust she had felt with Aung-Thwin and EyeSteelFilm right from the beginning.

According to Aung-Thwin, he realized that by the time Västrik came to EyeSteelFilm, she was already in over her head. Because the Swedish funding agencies had finally agreed to the maximum possible level of financing, EyeSteelFilm's role in finishing the film had to be that of a co-producer. It turned out to be a long process for the company. Since on the Swedish side things seemed to be progressing well on the financial front, Västrik chose not to wait to see if EyeSteelFilm would get funding from the CMF (Canadian Media Fund) and just kept moving forward. EyeSteelFilm had already applied for the CMF POV in June 2009, then in its initial year, and received confirmation in November 2009. But Västrik's planned departure to the Congo at the end of December 2009 created a bit of a rush for the company to submit the film to Telefilm Canada's co-production office that same month, in order to conform to their regulation that states that the application must be submitted prior to the start of principal photography. The final amount EyeSteelFilm received from the CMF was \$121,000.

The second difficulty EyeSteelFilm encountered was finding a broadcaster. In Canada, CMF funding is only triggered once a recognized broadcaster is on board. Bob Moore thought the demo was so "awesome and subversive and interesting and crazy," that it would sway people and easily convince a broadcaster. Much to his surprise, things were not quite so straightforward. It finally took "a year and a bit" for Super Channel to come on board in May 2011 and invest \$75,000 in the project, putting their trust in EyeSteelFilm, although they still did not really understand what the film was all about. As Moore told me; "Luckily, most of the money was earmarked for post-production, but, save for an absolutely key amount granted to us during 2010 by SODEC, the rest had to be self-financed under the hopes that we would eventually trigger and complete the financial structure."

The Canadian funding totalled \$360,000, including \$80,000 from SODEC and \$62,000 in tax credits. EyeSteelFilm Distribution put in \$4,000 and the producer's investment was \$14,000. Aung-Thwin said that what helped them the most in getting the Canadian funding was Västrik's persistence and the great footage she shot.

Essentially, EyeSteel's investment in the co-production was to provide travel expenses for Västrik when she came to Canada; film stock, film processing expenses in Europe; and postproduction in Canada. They trusted Västrik and her project to the point that, even if they only had a vague promise that they would get Canadian funding, they went ahead anyway. Editing the film took a long time. It was done in Sweden, because of Västrik's contention that she could not clearly explain in English what she wanted. Bringing the work to near-completion took close to a year. She also had problems finding a suitable ending to the film. Mila Aung-Thwin was called in as a consulting editor to help make a final cut, which took about another month.

This documentary, conceived from the beginning as a theatrical film,



Co-pros are like a romantic relationship—if you know things aren't going to work out, best to end it early than when you're married with kids and a mortgage.

— MILA AUNG-THWIN

is well crafted. The viewer comes to know and understand the Aka people and their eccentricities, sorrows and joys. Indeed, we become endeared to them. Västrik's presence is not a hindrance. The Aka talk to her while looking in the camera (she shot the whole film herself) and about her, hinting how she is now a part of their community. They can actually be quite protective of her, if not a bit condescending in their way of explaining how their world works. Here, too, there is a strong bond of trust.

Some images are hard to watch, such as the sharpening of the children's teeth with a knife, or the scarring of their faces with a blade. But these are rituals of the Aka society and fit perfectly in the portrait of their daily life that Västrik has drawn. There are also some great humorous moments, when the Aka people make fun of each other.

Unfortunately, there is no clear dramatic arc in the narrative. If it is clearly established that the Aka are slaves, it is done so subtly that is difficult to grasp to what extent the Aka suffer from the mistreatment of their owners. When Västrik wrote her intentions for the funding agencies, the project's narrative structure showed an arc that brought a lot of drama to the story: a major forestry company was going to

destroy the village where the Aka lived, but because of the economic crisis, the company shifted its attention from that particular forest and the Aka were safe again. A bit more tension might have strengthened the film, giving the viewer more suspense to hang on to.

There is a very important spiritual element in this film, related to the Aka way of living and believing. We also get the impression that in Aka culture, there is nothing more important than the presence of children. As someone says at the beginning, they "guarantee that our lives will continue." Västrik and her partners at EyeSteelFilm have joined forces to make a sensitive, humorous and, in parts, devastating portrait of the Aka people.

Västrik is now developing a new project with the Northern Sami peoples of Sweden. Mila Aung-Thwin would gladly co-produce with her again if the content warrants the involvement of EyeSteelFilm. He told *POV*: "I think it's good to work with people once you know how they work and that you can work together. Co-pros are hard. We've had a few fall apart at early stages in the past couple years—which is for the best. You really have to be firing on all cylinders to make it worthwhile. And you'd rather it fall apart earlier than later. It's very much like a romantic relationship—if you know things are not going to work out, best to end it early than when you're married with kids and a mortgage." ■

**Martin Delisle** is currently on contract at the NFB as Commissioner, editor, stock shots. He has worked freelance as a content consultant and film programmer and spent many years reviewing films for the CBC and various publications. From 1985 to 1988, Delisle was director of programming at the Canadian Film Institute and from 1989 to 2004, he worked at Telefilm Canada.