

INTERVIEW WITH ANNELI NYGREN

by Lorella Scacco

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Anneli Nygren (b. 1958) lives and works in Turku. She has made films and videos respectively from the end of the 1970s and early 1980s. Her work includes fiction films, animation films, music videos and documentaries. She also works as a freelance journalist.

- 1) When did you first start using video? What type of equipment did you use at the time?

My first video is from 1982 and titled *Rakkaudesta Rocktähteen* (*In Love with a Rockstar*). It was shot with a group of film amateurs. I had belonged to this club for many years. The others did 8 mm films, but then there was one guy with whom I worked closely. We used his equipment (separate camera and recorder). Everything was shot in chronological order because there were no editing possibilities.

Then, some months later, I made a video with a camera from my uncle's workplace. My uncle was shooting, while I and my aunt were acting (various characters, various outfits). It was much more complicated, he had not so much experience. This video was also shot in chronological order.

Next year I made another video with the film amateur group (*Visions, Scenes & Dreams*, 1983), and another with my uncle and aunt (*A Little House in Kiiminki*).

But I didn't have a videocassette recorder (VCR), nor did many of my friends. Even the amateur club (which projected films of the members) had only film projectors. Nobody seemed to have interest to show these videos.

I had my own VCR in 1984 (but no camera). I continued with 8 mm films, there were some screenings of them, but mostly I didn't get my films ready, and all the new friends said: "I am no actor".

- 2) Why was video as a device particularly attractive for you at the time? How did you start to use video?

Well, it wasn't so attractive at first... Cameras were big, and in the beginning, you had separate camera and recorder... So, you couldn't move a lot, you couldn't edit, you couldn't show your work, but the moving pictures, stories and acting was still fascinating.

- 3) We know that your first film *Tytti tyttelin in Christmasland* is dated 1977. Can you describe us the production process of this work?

Tytti Tyttelin in Christmasland was shot in 8 mm film, and it has some specially film-specific elements. Tytti Tyttelin was a fictional character I had been writing stories, drawings, and little plays, even a little Magazine "Tytin Lehti" (mostly in 1970-76). In 1977, "Tytin Lehti" was still around, not so much the stories, etc.

I wanted to do films about Tytti Tyttelin, but I didn't take any old story about her. I wanted to test some tricks I had read from a film book, especially disappearing people and things. There is also reverse action in the text section (the text seems to be disappearing).

This film was shot in three sections (and my clothes change every time), first time in December 1976, one at Christmas '76, and the last one in beginning of '77. Then I had to send the films to be developed, and in 1-2 weeks they returned to me.

The Santa Claus came to film by accident. We were shooting something else at Christmas (of course!), and then the Santa Claus came from the door. My aunt suddenly turned the camera to the door, and filmed Santa Claus, who was, again, my uncle. He was not Santa for us, he was only returning from a gig.

Next time (1977) we made the outdoor scenes & scenes with my grandfather. They were planned so that they suit the previous scenes and end the story.

- 4) Your films are characterised by an imagery of the time created by pop and television stars and their fans, like in *In Love with a Rockstar* (1982) and *Rendez-Vous with Destiny* (1989). How did you develop these specific themes in your practice and why video was a notably suitable medium to do it?

The popular culture is very much connected with my other experiences, as a writer and journalist. I was also studying film theory at the University of Turku, and I was especially interested in television.

At the time of *Love with a Rockstar* I was in the beginning of my career, I had published some LP and book reviews, but mostly I was on the (punk & new wave) fanzines. I also came to know some celebrities (mostly other rock journalists).

In *Love with a Rock Star* the name of the star is not told, but it is mostly based on two men: one is really a singer, while the other is more a writer (although he did a record too).

At times of *Rendez-vous with Destiny* the situation was different. I had found cultural magazines ("kulttuuri- ja mielipidelehdet"). I was mostly writing longer articles, not so much about rock but television.

I had written about Joan Collins, Knight Rider, Sci-Fi oriented texts, the movie Flashdance, etc. I had been avoided artistic films, not so much because I didn't like them (I did), but because I felt I had more to say about popular films.

Additionally, *Rendez-vous with Destiny* was originally a text I submitted for a magazine, but I had already decided the following: if the magazine doesn't accept it, I don't send it to other magazines anymore, but I will make a film inspired by it.

Rendez-vous with Destiny is loosely based on some happenings in real Dynasty series, with a Turku's twist.

At those times (when there were more VCRs in homes and schools) many people made scratch videos (with existing video materials about celebrities, politicians, etc.) and I did something too, but in a serious work I wanted to do thing from the beginning. (And if I made a video of Joan Collins, I certainly wanted to BE Joan Collins.)

Dallas was a big thing in Finland in the '80s. There were several analysis and parodies in mainstream media. But it wasn't so much about female themes, mostly about corruption & economic power in Ewing universe (I mean the Dallas family serial).

Many years later, after reading a lot of foreign TV studies, when I read a female student and her studies about "social issues in Dallas", such as divorce, adoption, alcoholism – no "hard politics at all". It was also for me a reminder that personal is political.

- 5) In some videos of the '80s and '90s you addressed subjects connected to feminism. In the '70s and '80s were you interested to feminism or were you part of any feminist groups?

It was a kind of love-hate relationship. Especially in punk times, sometimes when we were interviewed and I was the only girl in the group, I was very straight that I don't need feminism. It felt like "they" don't understand nothing, they cannot join to some "ism". Then again, in my own magazine there were aggressive feminist ideas. Because punk was aggressive, so also my feminism had to be aggressive enough!

Later I wrote in Naisten Ääni (Feminist Union's magazine). There was also a video group in the apartment of Unioni. I had a video evening myself at Unioni in 1989.

I was also teaching at a video course (with Maria Kytömäki) at their Villa Salin (Lauttasaari, Helsinki) in summer 1989.

Some people in this course became actors in my film *Pursuit of Happiness* (1990). Maria Kytömäki was the heroine in *Pursuit of Happiness*. She was mostly organizing video-oriented happenings at Unioni and outside. I'm not sure any more how I got to know her, maybe it was some advertisement she was seeking women's videos? Maria was more female-oriented than me, but sometimes we were both a little bit outsiders.

There were also some women's music projects, one was Tyttö tuli (It's a girl)-concert, which was planned almost one year. They were mostly for ready bands and artists - of which I didn't get so much - and especially all-female bands. They listened my cassette - mostly my own recordings, but then one song a male band with girl singer had made to my lyrics. Of course, the latter was the only song they were interested - but they had to compose it anew because the original composer was a man! (It was in the concert, anyway).

Another music project was *Rockluuta* (*Rock Broom*), which was even more for ready (female) bands. Now I have read there are projects where bands are formed, instruments can be borrowed and taught in the beginning. It would suit better me.

- 6) *Invisible Dolls Sound Parade* (1987) is a video which argues about power and love through dolls and paper cut out animations and home movies. Why did you use the Barbie dolls as protagonists in a few videos?

Invisible Dolls Sound Parade was also 8 mm film which was transferred to video, home movies and animations are from different times. The songs were collected from my cassettes, and some instrumental was played for the dancing scene also (my very modest keyboard).

Why did I use dolls? I think I have always used them. Of course, as a younger, especially when I used the same dolls I had been playing with. It was important to emphasize IT IS ART, NOT PLAY. (But of course, the family members never really believed it).

I know that animators usually make their own characters - but, well, I don't. Maybe it sounds weird, but I have always felt the Barbies more realistic than any others. Of course, they are like supermodels, but they are better than many others.

And when I needed a new character, it was easier to buy just one doll, and the old ones were still in the group.

By the way, in *Invisible Dolls* it was my first time to have new dolls, until that I DID have mostly the same ones I had played with. Nowadays it's mostly the new dolls.

I know that many people use Barbie dolls to comment western beauty ideals, etc. - but I don't. They're just actors. But of course, I have seen the limits. When I made *Vetsherlink*

Family (vampire film with Barbie dolls), in which there are about 50 characters in a city, they started to look all similar... There were also a 50-year-old Mayor and “the oldest citizen in town” - not so easy. (*Vetsherlink Family* was shot in 1994-2000).

The main reason, of course, is that it’s not always easy to get actors. But somehow, many people are very happy if you need only their voice... (In many Barbie videos in YouTube, I have noticed, the creator often does all the voices - something I never thought...)

- 7) Were there some video centres with which you collaborated? How did you produce your video artworks?

The first editing experience was with equipment of an amateur group. This was very rude machinery, two VHS recorders and a small unit between them. First time I used this was 1986, maybe until 1992.

In the 1990s I edited a lot in a city youth center video workshop (“Palatsi”). There was also another place in Turku called “Videopaja Halliwiudi”.

Especially in Palatsi there were larger fees for adults (per an hour). In 2000s the system changed: you bought a yearly card (200 marks), and you could edit as much as you want. But the machines were already very worn out, especially the voices, so I had to think something else.

There were no group activities in those places. Nobody wanted to see what I had done or discuss it. I don’t know if it was because I was older, or if it only wasn’t part of the job. Some people came to edit as a group, but for me that really doesn’t make a sense. Two people can maybe work effectively, but more is a nuisance.

I also participated video courses at the KSL Study Centre in Helsinki. This was originally a leftist organization for folk education established in 1964. In the 1980s they began to concentrate on video, thanks to Perttu Rastas who was working there.

Mostly video courses in the 1980s began with anatomy of video cassette. Thus, it is not surprising that you don’t get the practical issues very soon. Especially editing was something which we never had time, but then, of course, came a course only on editing. In the courses, people were divided in groups, which made one video (our practice jobs I haven’t seen ever since). Some people came together, others already as a group.

There was a lot of other action at KSL, such as discussions, video happenings, magazines. Once we made a London trip. I had some friends, but not really any group. I edited there a couple of times; I rented the camera when I shot in Helsinki. In *Pursuit of Happiness* the office of Michael Kitt’s agent is shot in KSL office.

There was maybe some group spirit when shooting, but actors didn’t usually show up when the video was shown, and it was ok for me. I had got what I wanted, and they had the knowledge where the video was shown.

- 8) How did influence your activity of publishing ‘magazines’ with your practice of videos?

One of my first articles on my own films was in “Tytin Lehti” in 1977. I had read film history book of a Finnish lecturer and film enthusiast, Peter von Bagh, and his style impacted in this article in which I presented my 8 mm films. Although, I did not have very much material ready, the article was full of “lyrical visions”.

In the early 1980s, I did not really write on my own videos in my own magazines. However, I tried to promote them in other magazines, especially *Rakkaudesta Rocktähteen* (*Love with a Rockstar*). I sent stories from different points of view - and some of them were also printed. Those were of course stories of an already finished works. Sometimes I tried also “coming soon” news - the problem was that I didn’t never actually know if it’s “coming soon” - or ever!

During *Pursuit of Happiness*, however, I wrote some articles long time before it was finished because I was so enthusiastic, such as, for example, for FILMAAJA, which was a magazine of film amateur organization. For FILMAAJA, I also did stories of only screenings.

About *Vetsherlink Family* (1994-2000) I wrote during the process, like also about *Turku Vampire* (2007-) - I published for example preview news, parts of dialogue, lyrics of the songs, caricatures, even photos.

I have published two “video magazines” of my fanzines in 1992 and 2008. (My magazine was called then “Dream Kitchen”). They had little documentaries, book reviews, jokes, little music videos, experimental elements... Some of the texts, which were read by voice actors, were from actual “Dream Kitchen” magazine, some were only on video.

Magazines did not so much influence my videos (although my heroine was often rock journalist...). There were some documentaries in my early works, but not until the 2000s I started to interview people on video.

9) Did you collaborate with any TV broadcaster at the time?

There were two video programs in Finnish Yle in 1990. The first one was “Taiteen laita” - my episode was actually shot in 1989. This was quite a long interview with some videos. It was directed by Ilppo Pohjola.

There was also another series called “Videootti” - my *Rendez-vous with Destiny* was in one episode. Although the name “Videootti” sounds stupid, it was mostly video art, I remind not so much interviews but actual videos. So, *Rendez-vous with Destiny* was both in “Videootti” and “Taiteen laita” in the same year.

There was one project I tried to participate. In Turku Student Village there was own cable channel about 1984-85. They used U-matic cameras and needed 3-4 persons to move that equipment. I spoke several times of my films, which were VHS. They should have transferred to U-matic, probably on my own cost.

I was two times as an announcer on that channel, though.

10) How did you show, distribute, and promote your videos in the 1980s?

I tried a lot. I wrote buffs and flyers. I seek out where independent films and videos are presented.

My first screening outside club and family was 1980 Aurajoki happening (but they were 8mm films). I had to choose different works for copyright reasons, which were not so important in private screening. So, I had to show works with no music and own music (and without the voice, like *Tytti Tyttelin*).

Some works were presented in Tampere in various film clubs, but I wasn’t there, friends brought them there.

Love for a Rock Star wasn’t visible very often, maybe 2-3 times in 1985 and after.

In 1986 I organized “Literary and video” happening, where we presented a new video about Finnish writer Rosa Liksom and one of my own videos. (The Rosa Liksom’s video was published by KSL, and I rented it). And when you organized something by yourself, you also had to carry all those heavy VCRs and televisions.

But 1989 was my greatest year. I met Maria Kytömäki and went to a lot of women’s happenings. I had own screening at Unioni 1989, and I participated women’s festival in Tampere (*Rendez-vous with Destiny* and *Soft* are mainly presented as videos, but in Tampere as films, because they didn’t have VCR!!). Then same spring there was still one women’s festival in Jyväskylä, but I wasn’t there, only the works.

“Videolehti” was a commercial magazine, about cameras, VCRs and televisions, but there were also some articles on video makers. There was also news about Kuopio Video festival, in which I sent a tape. In “Videolehti” magazine it was not very clear, but the Kuopio Video festival was actually a video art festival, which later came to Helsinki and changed its name in MuuMediaFestival.

Most of the videoart scene was born and grown during the 1990s, and so was most of my own fame. I had works at the MuuMediaFestival almost every year, then there was Lahti AV-Biennale, where I sent tapes about three times. My works were within the programs, but never so visible that somebody would notice in Turku...

(In Turku there was Media Gallery where my works were presented in 1990, 1992 and 1993).

- 11) In the years of your first video experiments, did you often travel from Turku to Helsinki? How important was to attend the cultural milieu of Helsinki at the time? Did you travel abroad?

I did visit a lot in Helsinki, but not so much for video reasons. I went to those KSL courses, however, and made some shootings and recorded voice actors. Cultural trips were often rock concerts and theater plays. Visual arts and galleries came quite late to my life, basically through the friends.