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Documentary and the question of knowledge

Ruthless Times, Songs of Care

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Abstract

Ruthless Times: *Songs of Care /Armotonta menoa – Hoivatyön laulujaan* (Helke 2002) is an acclaimed musical documentary about the privatization of elderly care. I explore how the film was framed by the director Susanna Helke, in written articles and in an interview, as artistic research, and consider how this research engages with the question of knowledge production in terms of the director's stated aims and reference points, particularly Bertolt Brecht and Jacques Rancière. I analyse to what extent, as Helke suggests, it can be seen as creating a "rupture", in Rancière's sense, in relation to previous documentary forms and languages. I argue that while the film faces some of the same issues that critical art often confronts in terms of spectator address, its process of working with its topic and its participants nonetheless embodies a progressive model of feminist witnessing.

Keywords: artistic research, Rancière, feminist, musical documentary, witnessing.

The question of how knowledge is produced, what knowledge, who it is for and who benefits from it has been a key issue in debates about documentary film. Documentary is, therefore, a fruitful site for analysing the kinds of insights that can be produced through making – insights which contribute not only to developing aesthetics and ways of doing, but also to the broader question of what constitutes the 'knowledge' that a creative work can produce. In this article, I focus these broad questions through a discussion of a specific project made in a research context, *Ruthless Times*: *Songs of Care /Armotonta menoa – Hoivatyön laulujaan* (2002), an acclaimed musical documentary about the privatization of elderly care. Firstly, I explore how the film was framed by the director Susanna Helke, in written articles and in an interview, as artistic research, and consider how this research engages with the question of knowledge production in terms of the director's stated aims, and reference points, particularly Bertolt Brecht and Jacques Rancière. I analyse to what extent, as Helke suggests, her film can be seen as creating a "rupture", in Rancière's sense, i.e. a reconfiguration of the habitual "distribution of the sensible" that is "predicated on pre-given distinctions between supposed opposites – between viewing/knowing, appearance/reality, activity/passivity" (Rancière 2009, 12), opposites that Rancière attributes to audiences and directors respectively. Secondly, I consider the other insights that I see the project offering as a form of "feminist witnessing", which exceed the director's own theoretical framing of it, by drawing on interviews I conducted with the main narrator, Tiina Mollberg and the director herself. I argue that while the film faces some of the same issues that other critical art often confronts in terms of its address to spectators, its process of engagement with its topic and its participants nonetheless embodies a progressive model of feminist documentary practice.

Ruthless Times: Songs of Care was made as part of a research project at the University of Aalto Critical Cinema Lab entitled 'Images of Harmony and Rupture: Documentary Film Reflecting Fractures in the Scandinavian Welfare State Ethos' which "intends, through theorising, filmmaking, and colliding theory with praxis, to catalyse new approaches and methods of revealing the paradigm shift in the Finnish welfare state" (Helke 2019a, 210). I begin by discussing how Helke herself articulates her aesthetic approach in *Ruthless Times* in two articles, both published before the film was completed.

In both pieces, the director highlights the importance of the concept of estrangement to her methods, which, Helke (2019b) states, is "at its very core, an emancipatory strategy in art". The subject of the deconstruction of the Scandinavian welfare state demanded a means of representation which departed from the tradition of social documentary which might focus on more immediately observable instances of poverty and injustice; instead, this social and political change was a more "gradual, invisible process". The director cites Eisenstein and Brecht as examples of artists who formulated their poetics in writing which were then embodied in praxis; the former drawing on the latter and other Russian formalists to develop his conception of the *verfremdungseffekt*. Through various devices, such as using songs whose lyrics jarred with their musical style, a montage of scenes as opposed to a linear narrative, this *verfremdungseffekt* is often translated as "the alienation effect". These methods were intended to force the audience to consciously reflect on the social and political drivers of the characters' actions as opposed to having an emotional identification with them. Estrangement, Helke (2019b) proposes, is a necessary and still valid tactic for laying bare neoliberal ideology: "As the politico-economical rhetoric has normalized the paradoxical idea of generating profit

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from caring for the elderly, the cinematic strategies in this film seek to render visible – through dark satire and the defamiliarizing effect of the tableau vivant flash mob scenes with choir music – the absurdity of this logic" (Helke 2019b).

The topic of the privatization of care homes for the elderly, and the resistance to it, is evoked in the film through a hybrid combination of documentary modes. The observational mode is used to cover residents' and council meetings at Kaavi, a small municipality in NE Finland. where decisions are being made to outsource care to a private monopoly. Inventive choral sequences that mock the techno-bureaucratic language of "efficiency" used to quantify careare performed by both elderly residents and by singers playing nurses and interwoven with the observational scenes. Documentation of the development of the new private care home is also juxtaposed with individual stories which are told in participatory mode, in Nichols' (2017) sense, in that they involve testimonies elicited by the film-maker; firstly that of Tiina Mollberg, a nurse shown working in a well-run foundation home, who acted as a whistleblower about conditions in the private facility where she was previously employed, and secondly of the two Vainos, elderly citizens of the town whose wives are in care.

The editing of *Ruthless Times* does not produce the radical clashes of early intellectual montage within individual sequences of the kind we might find in Eisenstein but is instead deployed in how sequences, rather than shots, are counterpointed. Mollberg's careful support of very elderly patients who are slow and confused are intercut with the chorus of nurses' words recounting the lack of time allowed to attend to anyone. Mollberg attending to a dying resident in bed, talking softly to her, giving her painkillers, and washing her face, is intercut with a sequence where a new robot "companion", 'Sara', is being introduced into a Helsinki care home. When a young staff member (the robot designer?) proposes to an elderly resident that he could spend time with 'Sara' today he retorts: "With that thing? Hell no! If that's entertainment we are all dim!". The ideology that that the human needs can be met through these forms of automation is thus thrown into relief – not least because the old man, maybe also playing up to the camera, says he would rather have some entertainment with a "chick" across the room.

A dialectic is proposed both between and within the choral scenes since the affective form of the music is combined with the intriguingly contrasting lyrics, exhibiting a black humour reminiscent of dada and surrealism. For example, in one of the first choral sequences, a tracking shot shows a group of elderly residents who are working out in the gym singing, "The sustainability gap is us…in the land of budget deficits… the public sector, it is us/Bloated way beyond its capacity". This song parodying the rationale behind the attacks on the public sector as inefficient is repeated at various points in the film.

Helke (2019b) wishes to distinguish *Ruthless Times* from historic "social documentary" which she sees as epitomized in John Grierson's "propaganda for good" in the British Documentary Movement, and the photography of Jacob A. Riss and Lewis Hine in which "the subjects are mute bodies providing evidence". She emphasises that her "singing tableaus are used as interruptions which aim to trigger ruptures in the ways reality is addressed and experienced rather than [for the spectator] to find identification within the victim narrative". The director draws on Rancière's concept of "the rupture" - that is a break which confounds the common-sensical notion of how the social is apprehended through the senses. This "distribution of the sensible", "sets the division between what is visible and invisible, sayable and unsayable, audible and inaudible" (Sayers n.d.). Rancière argues that:

> Emancipation begins when we challenge the opposition between viewing and acting; when we understand that the self-evident facts that structure the relations between saying, seeing and doing themselves belong to the structure of domination and subjection. It begins when we understand that viewing is also an action that confirms or transforms this distribution of positions. (Rancière 2009, 13).

Most critical art, he suggests, does not escape this dualism since it starts from the assumption that the spectator is passive and must be made active, and conscious, by the creative work. This is the case even, Rancière claims, in their contrasting ways, in Bertolt Brecht's and Antonin Artaud's radical theorizations of theatre but the French

philosopher contends that if we eschew this association of viewing with passivity, it is clear that "the spectator also acts, like the pupil or the scholar. She observes, selects, compares, interprets" (ibid, 13).

One might think if the spectator is really active as Helke implies, following Rancière, why do they need to be jolted into knowledge by the filmmaker through her use of estrangement and montage? And what might "they" know already that means they do not need to be told by the documentarist? Helke's articulation of her project as aiming to make visible the normalization of austerity, albeit through reflexive methods, might be said to still fall into very distribution of the sensible that Rancière critiques. While it is important to deconstruct the ideology which proposes that private companies are necessarily better at running public services especially when the supposed efficiencies and savings are actually socially and economically damaging, it could be argued that those suffering the most from such cuts may well be aware of the flaws of neo-liberal policies and politics from their lived experience.

Rancière refutes the idea that underpins Brecht's conception of epic theatre, i.e. that "[the] spectator must see what the director makes her see" (2009, 14). Yet, the address of *Ruthless Times* could nonetheless be said to be didactic in its desire to have specific effects on the viewer in imparting knowledge of neoliberal economics and its defects through its montage and the use of hybrid modes, even while it avoids direct exposition. This tension between a didactic intention and the wish to prompt the spectator's own political conclusions is course, not an issue peculiar to this film. It is a problem confronted by all "critical art", such as Brecht's and Martha Rosler's, that seeks to create awareness of a political situation through "clash of heterogenous elements provoking a rupture in ways of seeing and, therewith, an examination of the causes of that oddity" (Rancière 2009, 74). In such work, Rancière proposes, "the aesthetic break was absorbed into representational continuity" (75), by which I take him to mean that this art's aesthetic disruptions do not fundamentally question the capacities attributed to makers and viewers respectively, or the power relations implied in them, particularly because they aim at producing a calculated effect, thus reinforcing the sense of aesthetic disconnection between art, artists and "community".

Helke's writing about the film and her presentation of it as creating "a rupture" in representational strategies thus point to a set of much larger questions about the possibility of an explicitly political art, or rather the French philosopher's concern with the ways in which politics itself might be aesthetic, which most documentaries are not able to address, despite their authors' desire to further social change. Instead, I ask: how then might we see the politics of *Ruthless Times* if we shift the focus from the spectator to another implicit question about power - that is, the role of the participants in the film and their relationship to the director?

Documentaries feature real people performing in their everyday lives rather than, in general, professional actors - a key and essential difference from the Brechtian theatre for example that Rancière critiques. The filmmaker Joao Moreira Salles (2009) suggests that the kinds of knowledge a documentary produces, and its desired or supposed impact on the spectator, must be judged by the way it treats its participants, since its rhetoric about social change should not be isolated from its own *modus operandi*. In wrestling with the various attempts to define documentary, he concludes that "we do not succeed in defining the genre by its outward duties, but rather its inward obligations. It is not what can be done with the world, but what cannot be done to the character" (234). I will conclude this essay by looking at how *Ruthless Times* mitigates the issue of the power attached to the role of the director, who crafts the stories of others but also wishes, as Helke puts it, to accept the "undeniable agency and subjectivity" of their participants and assume their equality as a "point of departure" as opposed to something conferred by the filmmaker (Helke 2019b).

I will focus here on the main participant in the film, Tiina Mollberg, who was at the time of filming a nursing union activist, who had been sacked and blacklisted in 2011 for complaining about staffing levels in a private home, at a period when outsourcing to private corporations was proceeding apace in Finland. Along with the letters solicited from nurses around Finland whose words are read or sung in the choral sequences, she is the main source of testimony regarding the conditions in elderly care. To some extent Mollberg's words are recruited to support the film's argument as they usually are in, what Nichols (1997) originally termed the "interactive documentary" and later "participatory documentary", i.e.

where there is an encounter between the director and the contributor and the interaction often revolves around an interview. As Nichols comments, "interviews are a form of hierarchical discourse deriving from the unequal distribution of power, as in the confessional and the interrogation" (Nichols 1997: 47).

In the participatory documentary, contributors' voices are often recruited to the filmmaker's argument, as for instance in Deidre Fischel's film *Care* (2017) which follows severely under-paid, individual carers in their work looking after elderly clients at home. *Care* uses these workers' interview responses on the soundtrack as evidence of their dedication and skill which goes scarcely remunerated and socially unrecognized. The film, though, does not contextualize these experiences as the product of a specific social and economic system or indeed something which could be organized against, thus tending to objectify the carers' emotional testimony as evidence of their victimhood. However, I argue that while the distribution of power in relation to the the crafting of *Ruthless Times* is in Helke's favour, she works with Mollberg to align the "voice" of the documentary with Mollberg's voice to produce a form of feminist witnessing. By "voice of the documentary", I'm referring to Bill Nichols' definition of it as "something narrower than style: that which conveys to us a sense of a text's social point of view, of how it is speaking to us and how it is organizing the materials it is presenting to us" (Nichols 1983: 18). I have explored elsewhere (Thynne 2011) how Kim Longinotto's documentaries also enact a feminist witnessing in a different way to align their voice with their subjects' interests. Longinotto, acknowledging the power inequalities between herself and her participants, uses her privileged position as a white woman with a camera in situations of conflict between abusive men and the women they oppress to pressure the men to amend their behaviour.

Ruthless Times enacts a feminist witnessing through its interweaving of the individual speech and appearances of Mollberg with that of the collective speech and performances of other nurses. Mollberg's narration is produced and presented in a more collaborative and performative way than is usual in the participatory documentary. I use the term "performative" to mean involving a deliberate performance on the part of the contributor to foreground aspects of their experience and identity. While the relationship to

the idea of performance, in the simple sense of playing a role, is less evident in Nichol's (2017) discussion of the term "performative", which is somewhat diffuse (149-158), his description of it here and its relationship to "a feminist aesthetic" is pertinent to *Ruthless Times*: "Just as a feminist aesthetic may strive to move audience members, regardless of their actual gender and sexual orientation, into the subjective position of a feminist character's perspective on the world, performative documentary seeks to move its audience into subjective alignment or affinity with its specific perspective on the world" (152).

Helke notes in her interview (2023), that the film is a "shared project" and this is corroborated by Mollberg, who I also interviewed to get her view of the relationship and of the film. Mollberg is happy with the film which she says was a very good experience, even though she feels it may have had some effect on her career (Mollberg 2024). Far from being a victim who is present as "evidence" in *Ruthless Times*, Mollberg already had a high profile on television and in the press around the time of her previous dismissal when she was speaking out about how private profits were sucking funds from care outsourced by councils. Her collaborative working with Helke as a key witness is suggested by the process of creating the narration. Helke drafted a script based on initial interviews, conversations and emails, which was then revised with, and performed by Mollberg for an audio recording in order to "crystallize" the important parts of her story for the film as well as reflecting her specific turns of phrase (Helke 2024). The effect is to underline the narration as a conscious performance, even if this was not an effect which was deliberately intended but was undertaken for pragmatic reasons to condense Mollberg's key points and anecdotes. Such a method avoids putting a participant on the spot in the supposedly more authentic and spontaneous, live interview. Mollberg feels comfortable with how she was represented as she reports that she "felt she was completely herself in the film" (Mollberg 2024). In my interview with Mollberg, she often responded to questions about the film by moving swiftly on to talk about the ongoing cuts and crisis in elderly care in Finland, and their impact on nurses like herself, which suggested to me, not surprisingly, that this was a more important concern for her than the aesthetic and structural particulars of the documentary.

However, in *Ruthless Times*, it is specifically Mollberg's extensive spoken testimony about the abuse and neglect of the elderly that actually renders visible what cannot otherwise be seen. For many reasons it could not be filmed: filming would not be possible in the private care homes where Mollberg and the other nurse complainants worked or work. Also, the patients that Mollberg mentions were also suffering from dementia; to record their suffering and neglect, even if it were possible, would reinforce their victim status. We see her in her current job interacting with patients – who are shown in a dignified a way as possible; when they are able to speak, they are shown joking with her, such as when a woman refers to her diaper as 'rustproofing'. Mollberg comments that the scenes are 'natural as they were shot from my work' suggesting she feels that they portray their situations well. The craft of Helke and her editors, Markus Leppälä, Inka Lahti, Samu Kuuka, then make these scenes emblematic of what good care should mean, through creating a contrast between the time Mollberg is now shown having with each patient, with the overlaid stories of her experience working for her former employer, the private provider.

The edit of the film works to validate her testimony and grant it authority: in an early sequence she recounts how she and one other

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nurse were expected to care for sixty-six patients overnight; she had to leave her dementia ward to help the other nurse, and the patients ran amok so that she could only calm them down playing music and dancing with them until the day shift arrived at seven. Later in the film, she is shown seated in her flat looking at press cuttings which report how, in 2019, the issues of under-staffing resurfaced in the relocated private home. She reads a quotation from one of the clips "The union points to the nursing home in Hameenlina as an example of how not to handle tendering and over-sight", and comments, "and that was eight fucking years ago".

The director links Mollberg's individual experience as a nurse to the testimonies of the very many other nurses, whose words recounting the impossibility of providing adequate care in a profit-driven corporate culture form the basis of the choral song lyrics in the musical sequences. The chorus motif is as an innovative form of witnessing distinct from the more individualized focus of earlier examples of the genre such as *Drinking for England* (1998) and *Feltham Sings* (2002) by British director Brian Hill, described as "documusicals", by Derek Paget and Jane Pascoe (2006). In *Drinking for England*, the sudden transformation of alcohol users into active performers who sing, works like in *Ruthless Times* to undercut the participants' stereotyping as victims. However, in Hill's films the focus is on individual characters who reveal themselves in song, like we might expect from a classical film musical.

In *Ruthless Times* the demeanour of the singers, who are a combination of actual nurses and performers, is deadpan rather than expressive: a tracking shot and close ups show their exhausted faces, revealing how they, like their patients, are also potentially vulnerable as they are not the "young brisk workers" against which the optimization system measures performance but mostly middle-aged and elderly women. The use of the song sequences to show these women *as a group* singing in a collective voice in this largely female and relatively low-paid profession is what makes the project a specifically feminist one, since it highlights the structural as opposed to personal circumstances that have led to a dereliction of social care with awful consequences for both carers and patients.

The perspectives of nurses who have been silenced in terms of being able to speak publicly about their employers are made present in the film in a way which protects them while exposing the

political and economic reasons for their systemic marginalization. The film's witnessing in this way is not something that Helke's own articles on the project identify, but her interview reveals that it is a creative solution that emerged in the process of making. She states (Helke 2023) that it became clear that the large volume of vital testimony from the nurses' letters needed to find a prominent place in the film even though the speakers themselves could not be directly shown or identified, and so the strategy of translating their words into song lyrics was devised in collaboration with the film's composer, Anna-Mari Kähärä. The role of the film team, not in "giving voice" to contributors, but in "orchestrating" their voices, aligning the film with their existing perspectives and activism and highlighting their political context, is an important contribution to feminist documentary practice and to the knowledge it can produce. I mentioned earlier that Ranciere's critique of radical art focuses on examples from Brechtian drama and photographic montage, and not on documentary featuring the words and experiences of real people. *Ruthless Times'* hybrid form is not *per se* what supports its claim to create a rupture with the usual hierarchies between viewing and acting or doing, I suggest, but its elicitation and deployment of the women's testimony in unexpected and affirmative ways to underline the contradiction between care and profit. The agentic performance of this testimony by both Mollberg and the singing nurses is a key element within the hybrid modes of the film that articulates what otherwise might be unsayable.

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