

Jan Ijäs with Eneos Çarka

In Conversation: Filmmaker Jan Ijäs on his documentary series *Waste* (2016-ongoing)

This interview was conducted by Eneos Çarka on behalf of the Tirana International Film Festival. It has been condensed and edited for clarity. A filmed version of the full interview is available on the festival's Vimeo page via the following link: <https://vimeo.com/645695630>

Jan Ijäs's documentary series *Waste* (2016-ongoing) offers new perspectives on how various societies react to and reappropriate refuse. Through critically interrogating waste as both an abstract concept and a material concern, Ijäs takes a more-than-human approach to anthropogenic habitats. On one hand, *Waste* harshly critiques the continuous and devastating effect humans have on the earth. On the other hand, it finds hope in recycling as an activity that is embedded in human nature. Ijäs shows how discarded objects circulate, traverse borders, adopt new meanings, and sometimes new forms. Hyperinflation rendered the Zimbabwean dollar worthless, but its banknotes find new applications as literal recyclable goods used as tablecloths, lampshades, or as clothing accessories. Scraps from computer hardware are part of a global flow of salvaged gear that supplies new apparatuses. The Finnish government solves the problem of extreme cold by recycling books—the large quantity of which has created a problem of its own—turning the paper pages of thrown-away books into thermal insulation used in the heating systems of houses. The list of recycled articles expands beyond physical products as the docuseries considers a broad definition of waste that includes physical items such as vehicles, paraphernalia, weapons, money, debris from the Twin Towers, but also intangible entities produced by digitized technology. While it places man at the center of it all – as an agent adept at transforming junk into assets – *Waste* resists the urge to focus its narratives on human protagonists. Instead, it gives equal importance to the environment, humanity, and the refuse that humans produce.

The episodes, varying in length from as short as eight minutes to almost an hour, consist of vignettes narrated by a voiceover that accompanies

the 16mm imagery. Devoid of central characters, the series moves freely in all corners of the world creating an assemblage of garbage that acquires new uses as a result of individual and collective efforts. The anecdotes collected from various sources revolve around diverse manifestations of waste around the globe mirrored by recycling endeavors that challenge the very definition of rubbish. Together with the images, these anecdotes become allegories of waste and recycling, the Anthropocene and human nature. Much like the dumped objects featured in *Waste*, images too are recycled throughout the series. *Waste No. 2: Wreck* looks at the refugee boats that have been abandoned on the Italian island of Lampedusa, in an area colloquially known as “the graveyard.” The same images are used later to recount the tale of the Raft of the Medusa in *Waste No. 5*—another voyage that ended with ruination. The meta gesture of reappropriating his own images points to Ijäs's personal take on the topic, one that challenges the idea of outtakes and finds every image useful.

Each of the seven episodes is organized by a number and a subtitle. Though they comprise a larger whole, the episodes have seldom been shown together. Rather, select episodes have been exhibited as standalone short documentaries in art galleries and film festivals' special panorama programs, including the Bright Future Programme at the International Film Festival Rotterdam, which showcases experimental short films that border on video art. Elsewhere, individual episodes have competed for the best documentary award, including at the Tirana International Film Festival where this conversation took place following the screening of *Waste Vol. 1* in the Official Competition.

The first part of the ongoing series, *Waste No. 2: Wreck* centers on a ship graveyard on the island of

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Lampedusa in Italy. Here, Ijäs offers a meditation on waste as ambiguous matter, the value of which seems to alter as various interested parties appropriate the shipwrecks for both artistic and consumerist purposes. *Waste No. 3 Boom* examines the Finnish landscape in Kittilä, where the nation's armed forces annually dispose of expired explosives through detonations that form massive mushroom clouds. It shows how military weaponry and objects of destruction go to waste too, as every year, the surrounding villages of Kittilä witness a spectacle of explosions. In the third film of the series, *Waste No. 1: Money*, we see how Zimbabwean dollars have been turned into literal waste by inflation. While some throw their banknotes away, others retrieve, wash, and recycle money in different forms and for various purposes. The remains of vessels on Lampedusa return again as parallels to Théodore Géricault's painting *The Raft of the Medusa* (1818-1819) in the eponymous *Waste No. 5*. The tableau, which hangs in the Louvre, portrays the 1816 shipwreck of *Méduse*, a frigate with French colonizers on their way to African coasts. *Waste No. 6: How Great* is the longest in duration from the series, reaching fifty-six minutes in total, and deals with technological and informational waste. Virtual clouds, invisible to the naked eye yet present everywhere, are contrasted with technological debris and computer hardware that go to die in the Global South, only to be recovered and remodeled again for newer machines. *Waste No. 4: New York, New York* revisits the history of the city through twelve cemeteries and one landfill. The ghostly portrayal of the city offers a grim look at Hart Island's potter's field burial ground, chronicling the dislocation of the mass graves over time. The final installation of the series to date, titled *Waste Vol. 1*, explores how the concept of waste has evolved throughout the series by editing together footage from each of the previous episodes. Throughout the project, Ijäs offers a panorama of modern waste that he reckons with as an essential component of a human-populated world.

Waste No. 4 clearly expresses this idea when describing Fresh Kills, the biggest landfill in the history of the world, as "the most significant human-made portrait of the 20th Century in the Western Civilization." Located in Staten Island, New York, Fresh Kills is the ultimate place where waste goes to waste. The landfill releases toxic gases that pollute local waters and will persist

for centuries. "If archeologists in the future ever find it," the narrator remarks in a soothing voice, "it would be the most valuable treasure trove the planet has ever seen." Ijäs attributes historical value to this landmark of junk, considering it inseparable from human culture. Waste, in the end, is impossible to exclude from the future imaginary. Waste is part of the world we inhabit, and Ijäs urges us to reconsider our relation to it.



EC: I would like to first ask you about the order of the series. Is there a reason we start with *No. 2* instead of moving chronologically?

Ji: The separation in numbers is a result of my writing process. I wrote the shorts in a different order, and I started shooting them in another order. And they were finished in yet a new order. So, in the end, the numbers function to remind me of each short. It may sound strange, but there's really no other reason than this. It's kind of an inside joke, but only for myself.

EC: That makes me wonder about your choice to make this a series as opposed to a singular, feature-length work. Why did you think that your idea for *Waste* would benefit more from an episodic format than a feature or medium-length film?

Ji: It is mainly because of financial reasons. I introduced a bunch of these vignettes to my producers and the financiers. The financiers didn't really understand my idea of making a series of short films. The only way I could receive funding was if I agreed to a make a feature-length work out all the material. That explains the longer episode of the series that runs at about fifty-six minutes. But for me, these films were separate from each other and had their own length. The shortest is eight minutes, and the longest became fifty-six. Ideally, they would have all been shorts, but I had to make a longer version. On the other hand, it was very interesting to see all the footage as a compilation.

EC: You led me to the next question I was going to ask, and that is connected to the financing of the film.

JJ: Financing is always the toughest part for these kinds of films. I'm lucky to live in Finland where we have a National Broadcasting Company called YLE, which is very open to more artistic, nonfiction films. More than Netflix would be, or something of the kind. YLE has been quite open to a wide range of short and experimental films, although they don't have much money for these films. It has been enough for me so far, and for a few other Finnish filmmakers as well.

EC: It's always great to hear that there are funding opportunities for films that go beyond the conventional norms of storytelling.

JJ: Let's hope it continues like this.

EC: I would like to go into waste as a concept, which in your series takes different forms. I can make a list of objects turned into waste that the series delves into: money, ships, cars, books, electronics, explosives, human bodies even. And then there are more abstract ideas that are thought of as waste: memory, identity, stories, and, to some extent, images. Yet, all of these objects and ideas are recyclable, to the point that, if I had to change the title of your series, I would use *Recycled*—which is a very bad title. I'm curious to know what your understanding of waste is.

JJ: It all started with the vignettes. I was collecting these short stories long before I found the title, actually. And the title wasn't really my idea originally. A friend of mine, with whom I was working on another film, gave me the idea. Every week we would have a coffee together, and I would tell her the new stories that I had found. She suggested that I turn them into films, and suggested *Waste* as an umbrella title for them all. And in fact, you can really fit all of these vignettes under this one title. So, I thought about her suggestion for about five seconds, and then I decided to use it. It has been a long journey since. I've been working on this series for perhaps too many years.

EC: Does that mean that your idea of waste has evolved over the years?

JJ: It has. And for that reason, the final part of the series will deal with the entire planet as opposed

to local stories. I'm still not sure exactly what that will look like because of the way I work. I usually make important decisions in the final stages of the film. For example, the voiceovers are the last thing that I write, and very often I'm still writing them while we're recording the narration. So, I won't know how the last episode of the series will go until we record the voiceover. It may change completely from how it was up until that point.



EC: The voiceover is another aspect that I find fascinating about the films. The tone of the voice, the sarcastic text and the manner in which it is read, adds another dimension to the vignettes.

JJ: It's a funny story how I met Rebecca Clamp, whose voice narrates the films. I was flying with Finnair, which is the Finnish national airline, and as I was sitting in the plane before taking off, I heard a very beautiful voice reading security announcements. I was so mesmerized by her voice that I couldn't wait until we landed to find her and ask if she would narrate my documentaries. Luckily for me, she was happy to do it. She continues to read the security announcements for Finnair today. For this kind of job where you constantly tell the passengers about the many ways that the flight could turn into a disaster, you need a very calming voice to not alarm people. Because what you say can be scary.

EC: In the film, her calming voice becomes ironic. However, it's mostly the text that is very sarcastic at times. And I'm curious about your writing process. It seems to me that most of the stories about the people in the films linger in ambiguity. They're told as anecdotes, or as fables. So, I wonder if the voice—in some ways—speculates about these stories and maybe the future of the idea of waste.

JJ: My answer is always the same to this question. All that you see and hear is one-hundred-percent true. But it's the truth as I remember it. I collect the vignettes from different sources. For example, in *Wreck*, a good deal of the stories that I used there

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I found in TripAdvisor. I never use interviews. You don't see talking heads in my films, although I do conduct interviews while I shoot. Quite often, when I show up with a camera to interview someone, they expect their image to be taken. But I'm not interested in filming them sitting down and talking. So, I just put the camera on the tripod and leave it there, not rolling. And I use my small sound recorder to capture their voice and their story. However, very rarely do I go back to the recorded interviews. What is more important to me are the notes that I take while interviewing people. But, ultimately, my rule of thumb is that if I don't remember a certain element from their story, then it's not important for the film. All that matters is my memories. I trust my memory. That's the way the voiceover texts were developed. Once I finish shooting, I look at the footage and I immediately start editing. By editing, I mean putting the tales in order. I don't mean the narrative of the voiceover, but how the images connect to my memories of the accounts that I heard from the people. I try to make scenes with the images and the tales without any text. Then we go to the studio to record the voiceover. And a lot of times I have no text, so I start writing it then and there and Rebecca reads it as I tell it to her on the spot. You can say that we edit the voiceover while we record it, keeping in mind the images and the scenes. It's a simple and a fast method. It only happened a couple of times that we had to return to the studio to record new parts for the voiceover. I still stick to what I said earlier that what you see in these films is one-hundred-percent truth, but it's the truth as I remember it.

EC: "The truth as I remember it" is actually very interesting because it takes me to another topic that I want to talk about. When it comes to your decision of leaving out the voices of others, and the manner in which you retell the anecdotes through your perspective, it connects in part to the distance that you keep as a filmmaker. We feel that you are close, yet you are far. We can sense that you have spent time with the people you film and you have done your homework, yet, we don't know them, we don't hear them, and many of the images, particularly in *New York, New York*, suggest there are things immediately beyond our field of view. It seems that the camera cannot show what the voice utters. There's something out there that we cannot see. As if there exists a world we can only imagine. In the

case of *New York, New York*, it is the potter's fields, the dead bodies, and even the cemetery island and the landfill. You film the cemeteries and the landfill from afar, and they seem to remain mysterious to us. So, my question is how do you negotiate this distance between you and the subjects you film?

JJ: Since you brought up *New York, New York*, I remember having this idea of filming Manhattan without people. But it's quite difficult because it's always filled people. That's the reason, for example, why we used long exposure. In that way, we hoped to move the people out of the frame. In the case of Lampedusa, the topic of migration was very popular at the time we were filming. The island was full of reporters and news crews in search of the same images. They were looking for boats filled with poor refugees—the same images that you have seen everywhere, in every documentary or news report about the African immigrants landing in Italy at the time. I felt that we had to find another angle for the story. We decided to film only the touristic sites of the island, and to do it from such a faraway distance that you could not recognize any human faces. You could only see people as small figures. Whereas, for Hart Island in New York, it was impossible to get shooting permits. And since we could not step foot on the island, we took a fishing boat instead and circled around filming it. And, of course, the boat we rented turned out to be faulty and the engine broke mid-way. Whether the guards liked it or not, we had to dock on the island and wait for the engine to be repaired. While waiting for the boat to be fixed, I took out my camera and discretely shot images of the island while the guards were away. We did all this without permits and we finished just as the engine was fixed. We sailed back to Bronx, and soon after I took a look at the images I shot on the island. They felt weird to me because I always imagined filming the island from a distance. I think that if you go for details, then you have to stick to details. And sometimes the mystery of the story gets lost in details. If you start with a closeup, very often you need to stay in closeups for some time to keep the mystery going. You can keep the camera distanced and still tell the story from close. It's boring for me to narrate what I see. If I see a gravestone, I don't want to hear about it too. I either hear that story or see it. That was mainly the idea behind it. Yet, if we think of *How Great*, we did the very opposite.

The voice always tells what we see, and that becomes the running joke of the film. That helped the storytelling of the film, because everything is seen twice. We see the same faces twice and the voice changes the meaning of the images.



EC: I think that's partly because of the absurdity of the stories that we see in *How Great* where, for example, in the vignette set in Istanbul, people throw books away and garbage men collect them and open a library. This is followed by images of people in Finland tearing books apart to turn them into a resource for heat. The self-referentiality of the voice works there for me. It's interesting how you started your answer. You talked about wanting to film locations devoid of people.

JJ: It would be really funny to film New York without people, wouldn't it?

EC: We haven't really seen New York empty that often.

JJ: Exactly! Throughout the series, I use the same images for different stories. What I filmed in Lampedusa, for example, was reused in a different story in another episode of the series where I speak about the Raft of the Medusa. It seems like I'm telling the same story, yet it's different. The images of the sunken ships in *Wreck*, shot in Lampedusa, told the story of contemporary African refugees that landed in Europe. When I reused the same shipwrecked images in Raft of the Medusa, I told the story of Europeans on their way to the African continent to colonize it. The stories and the images cross over.

EC: I see a pattern here. You recycle both stories and images. It seems like your trademark.

JJ: In fact, the entire story of Raft of the Medusa is told with images that I shot for another film. It's a film done with leftovers of other films.

EC: Nothing goes to waste. Going back to New York without humans and the idea of the absence of people, it makes me think that, as much as these are stories about humans, a lot of them also show what humans have done to Earth. What I mean is that there is a more-than-human approach to the places you film, focusing on the environment and resisting a human-centered view on the world. There is a biocentric take on ecological crises that is not always very direct. And I would like to know why you didn't address this directly when it seems unavoidable in discussions about waste?

JJ: That's a difficult question! I don't know really.

EC: Maybe that's related to your future take on waste?

JJ: It is. But it's also simpler than that. It's also related to the materiality of film. Film today is more expensive than ever. Having people do something on camera consumes more time. Even simple human activities take time, and before you know it, you are out of film. For *Wreck*, I shot fifteen minutes in total, and the film runs ten minutes. The remaining five minutes of the footage went to telling the story of Raft of the Medusa. When I'm in the location with limited film material, I have to think of editing before shooting. Things, or people, that move complicate the process of shooting way more than a still landscape. And both can tell the same story. Nowadays, everybody shoots their documentaries in a digital format. That usually results in an endless amount of footage. But when you work on 16mm or 35mm, you must discipline yourself to think of editing before shooting. It doesn't necessarily mean having a script, because I never use a script. Yet, I'm already editing in my head before the camera rolls. I enjoy working in this way. I don't usually do research trips to the locations. I go there only when I have to shoot. The filming days are short and I spend no more than two-to-three days at the location. My crew is also very small. Often, it is just me and the sound recordist. That simplifies things. We're constantly discussing how to film our scenes. We ask ourselves what images of a landscape we need to tell a certain story. It's good to think in terms of what tells the story and what does not. Very often, we don't see people at all. I think that the landscape speaks more than people.

EC: Since we're talking about analog

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instead of digital, I would like to ask you about your decision to shoot on film. Would *Waste* be different if it were shot on digital?

JJ: I really like to think in terms of making a picture, as opposed to taking a picture. I wouldn't want to digitize a landscape. I prefer to make an image out of it. It would be cheaper, of course, to do it all in digital. But analog helps me think of cinema as something to be experienced and not consumed. I hate using the verb 'take.' I much rather like using 'make.' I don't take images, I make images. Otherwise, it feels like I'm stealing something.



EC: I know that the episodes have been shown in plenty of film festivals worldwide, but have they ever screened on other platforms or exhibition spaces?

JJ: They were originally screened at Helsinki Art Gallery. Whenever I have new film material, I first think of how I can put it together for the gallery space. I prefer it this way. It makes everything easier than dealing with TV broadcasters who would interfere with the editing process and so on. Even when I think that I'll make one version for the exhibition and another for festivals, more often than not, the gallery version turns out to be the

version that I screen everywhere. And that wouldn't be the case with TV productions. Thinking in this way inspires me to start new projects because I always imagine that I'm making films for the same ten-person audience that goes to galleries. Let's start with the small audience, I tell myself, and then do the bigger film. But I haven't yet done the big film.

EC: You are one of the few people that I know who brings nonfiction film to the gallery and constantly shifts between exhibition spaces, festivals, and TV.

JJ: I'm lucky that the Helsinki Art Gallery likes my films. They were even able to sell some of my films to different collectors and that has been absolutely great for me. I've been selling them as fine art more than as documentaries.

EC: Which is amazing even in terms of thinking about what documentary can be. It goes to show that it doesn't have to be confined to any norms.

JJ: Exactly! It's great that I have the chance to work in this way. And people react in interesting ways when they see documentaries in galleries. I heard that, once, a high school class went to Helsinki Art Gallery to watch one of the episodes of *Waste*. When the film finished, a student came forward and said "What was that? That cannot be true!" The teacher replied "Why do you think so? Of course, it was true. It was a documentary." The student responded: "No! It wasn't a documentary, it was art, and art is not true."

Eneós Çarka is a PhD student and Annenberg Fellow in Cinema and Media Studies at the University of Southern California. He is the Head of Documentary Programming at Tirana International Film Festival where, in addition to curating, he organizes events, masterclasses, workshops, and panels with filmmakers and industry. He was awarded an MA in Film Studies with Distinction from University College London and he graduated with Magna Cum laude from DocNomads Masters on Creative Documentary. His films have screened at numerous festivals, galleries, and cultural events such as Rencontres Internationales Paris/Berlin in Musée du Louvre, Message to Man IFF, and Festival dei Popoli among others. As both filmmaker and curator, he pays particular attention to issues of representations experimenting with various approaches to documentary cinema.

Jan Ijäs is a media artist and filmmaker who lives and works in Helsinki, Finland. He studied documentary film directing at University of Art and Design Helsinki, and creative writing and art education at Jyväskylä University. Ijäs works with documentary, fiction and experimental film. His films deal with serious and difficult social themes, like migration into foreign and hostile societies. Ijäs's films have been shown widely in film festivals and as installations in museums and galleries. He has won numerous awards, including Charlottenborg Spring Exhibition Jury Award in 2012; the Finnish Risto Jarva Prize in 2011; Amnesty International Award at the IndieLisboa Film Festival in Portugal 2018 and many more.