



NEW RELEASES

# Gunda

Where his prior film, the acclaimed epic *Aquarela*, was a reminder of the fragility of human tenure on earth, in *Gunda*, master filmmaker Victor Kossakovsky reminds us that we share our planet with billions of other animals. Through encounters with a mother sow (the eponymous Gunda), two ingenious cows, and a scene-stealing, one-legged chicken, Kossakovsky movingly recalibrates our moral universe, reminding us of the inherent value of life and the mystery of all animal consciousness, including our own.

[gunda.movie](http://gunda.movie)

Victor Kossakovsky's new documentary, *Gunda*, follows on from the director's previous film, the audiovisual collage exploring water's might, mystery and majesty *Aquarela* (2018), both as counterpoint and complement. Where *Aquarela* revelled in the awe-inspiring grandeur and terrifying power of water, *Gunda* luxuriates in the tranquil, day-to-day life of the eponymous sow and her piglets on a Norwegian farm. However, both films are aesthetically distinctive and experiential documents interested in examining humanity's relationship with an element of the natural world.

In the case of *Gunda*, conversation surrounding the film has largely focused on the attachment of the famously vegan Joaquin Phoenix as an executive producer. It's an understandable point of interest in discussion of a work that spends most of its 90-minute runtime endearing its subjects, a herd of farmyard pigs, to its audience, before reminding us, in no uncertain terms, of the pigs' ultimate fate and purpose as livestock. In his 1977 essay *Why Look at Animals?*, the theorist and cultural historian John Berger lamented the shift – exacerbated by capitalist society – in our association with animals from being symbols, messengers and the subjects of the earliest human art, to mere providers of leather and meat. Berger's writing feels like an appropriate touchstone for a film that seems to be attempting to redress that shift in some way, by genuinely placing the animal back in the centre of the frame.

The beautiful, crisp monochrome of the film's images, captured by the director and Egil Haskjold Larsen, has several simultaneous effects. It helps to reduce the distraction that vibrant colours may have on the attention of the viewer which, as a result, remains on the pigs' twitching snouts. Secondly, it plays on our familiarity with monochrome photography in two ways, by giving the film a timeless quality that we associate with black-and-white images and a mode that seems to draw out the most precise details.

This final point, and the adoption of the techniques of portraiture, seem to inform the film's compositions. Aside from a brief sequence following some cattle in which the camera is more withdrawn, it typically remains low to the ground and in close proximity to its subjects, offering something akin to a pig's-eye view. Similarly, the soundtrack is entirely natural, effectively field recordings of the local countryside, filled with birdsong. Both of these choices enhance the sense of verisimilitude in the film, creating the sensation that we are sitting alongside the pigs and, in some way, sharing a brief moment in their lives. The effect is helped by the complete absence of voiceover or contextual narration of any kind. In many instances, the more information we

are given – the more we intellectually know about an animal – the more we are distanced from it or placed above it. By withholding this knowledge – indeed, that the sow is named Gunda and that she lives on a farm in Norway are facts gleaned from publicity materials rather than the film itself – we are brought ‘down’ to the pigs level, in a position of greater affinity and empathy.

However, the absence of narration, music and other devices that typically feature in cinema to guide the viewer is also what stops the film from tipping overtly into what Kossakovsky has referred to as ‘vegan propaganda.’ Although audience members with a certain pre-existing set of beliefs will take the film to be positing a clear and unwavering message to meat-eating society – especially in its final ten minutes – the film itself remains a little more clear-eyed. By placing us close to the pigs’ lives while resisting the temptation to narrativise, *Gunda* allows viewers space to observe, ruminate, and formulate their own position in response to what they are seeing and experiencing.

In his essay, John Berger suggested that there is a dualism in our relationship with animals: ‘A peasant becomes fond of his pig and is glad to salt away its pork.’ The key word for Berger in this sentence is ‘and’, which he highlights is not ‘but,’ arguing that humans who are matter-of-fact and intimate with animals are capable of embodying both facets of this ancient relationship in concert, rather than contradiction. He then juxtaposes this with the horrified disconnection of urban observers; a reminder that our own reaction to Gunda’s conclusion will largely be symptomatic of our own experiences with nature.

And therein the power of Kossakovsky’s film, and his approach, arguably lies. Because the audience is wordlessly present with an experience that they must parse for themselves, the lessons and reflections are potentially deepened, more personal and impactful. Berger described the abyss of non-comprehension across which humans look at animals, and *Gunda* attempts to bridge it, just a little.

**Ben Nicholson, *Sight & Sound*, Summer 2021**

*Gunda* is a mesmerising perspective on sentience within animal species, normally – and perhaps purposely – hidden from our view. Displays of pride and reverence, amusement and bliss at a pig’s inquisitive young; her panic, despair and utter defeat in the face of cruel trickery, are validations of just how similarly all species react and cope with events in our respective lives. Victor Kossakovsky has crafted a visceral meditation on existence that transcends the normal barriers that separate species. It is a film of profound importance and artistry.

**Joaquin Phoenix, Executive Producer**

*Gunda* is pure cinema. This is a film to take a bath in – it’s stripped to its essential elements, without any interference. It’s what we should all aspire to as filmmakers and audiences – pictures and sound put together to tell a powerful and profound story without rush. It’s jaw dropping images and sound put together with the best ensemble cast, and you have something more like a potion than a movie.

**Paul Thomas Anderson**

---

## GUNDA

*Directed by:* Victor Kossakovsky

*A Sant & Usant production*

*In co-production with:* Louverture Films

*In association with:* Storyline Studios, Hailstone Films

*Executive Producers:* Joaquin Phoenix, Tone Grøttjord-Glenne

*Co-executive Producer:* Regina K. Scully

*Produced by:* Anita Rehoff Larsen

*Co-producers:* Joslyn Barnes, Susan Rockefeller

*Written by:* Victor Kossakovsky

*Co-writer:* Ainara Vera

*Directors of Photography:* Egil Haskjold Larsen, Victor Kossakovsky

*Edited by:* Victor Kossakovsky

*Co-editor:* Ainara Vera

*Sound Designer/Sound Editor/Re-recording Mixer:* Alexander Dudarev

USA/Norway 2020

93 mins

## BECOME A BFI MEMBER

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at [bfi.org.uk/join](https://bfi.org.uk/join)

## BFI SOUTHBANK

Welcome to the home of great film and TV, with three cinemas and a studio, a world-class library, regular exhibitions and a pioneering Mediatheque with 1000s of free titles for you to explore. Browse special-edition merchandise in the BFI Shop.

We're also pleased to offer you a unique new space, the BFI Riverfront – with unrivalled riverside views of Waterloo Bridge and beyond, a delicious seasonal menu, plus a stylish balcony bar for cocktails or special events. Come and enjoy a pre-cinema dinner or a drink on the balcony as the sun goes down.

---

## EVENTS & STRANDS

### Preview: In the Earth + Q&A with director Ben Wheatley

Thu 10 Jun 19:00

### Preview: Doctor Who: Dragonfire

Sat 12 Jun 12:00

### Relaxed Screenings: The Reason I Jump

Fri 18 Jun 14:30; Tue 22 Jun 18:10

### Woman with a Movie Camera: Wildfire

Sun 20 Jun 18:40 (+ Q&A with director Cathy Brady); Mon 21 Jun 18:10;

Tue 22 Jun 14:40; Wed 23 Jun 20:50; Thu 24 Jun 14:45

## BAGRI FOUNDATION LONDON INDIAN FILM FESTIVAL

### LIFF Opening Night: WOMB (Women of My Billion)

+ on stage Q&A with Srishti Bakshi and film critic Anna Smith

Thu 17 Jun 17:20

### My Beautiful Laundrette

Fri 18 Jun 20:20

### The Warrior + on-stage career interview with

writer-director Asif Kapadia

Sat 19 Jun 20:30

### Ahimsa: Gandhi the Power of the Powerless

Sun 20 Jun 15:00

### Searching for Happiness...

Tue 22 Jun 20:50

### Nazarband Captive

Wed 23 Jun 20:45

### A'hr Kayattam

Thu 24 Jun 18:00

### The Salt in Our Waters Nonajoler Kabbo

Sun 27 Jun 15:00

## SHEFFIELD DOC/FEST

### Opening Night: European Premiere: Summer of Soul (...Or, When the Revolution Could Not Be Televised) + pre-recorded Q&A

Fri 4 Jun 20:15

### UK Premiere: Lift like a Girl + pre-recorded Q&A

Sat 5 Jun 20:15

### International Premiere: My Name Is Pauli Murray + pre-recorded Q&A

Sun 6 Jun 18:30

### UK Premiere: The First 54 Years: An Abbreviated Manual for Military Occupation + pre-recorded Q&A

Fri 11 Jun 20:20

### Closing Night: World Premiere: The Story of Looking + pre-recorded Q&A

Sat 12 Jun 20:50

## TONGUES ON FIRE: UK ASIAN FILM FESTIVAL

### Opening Night: Raahgir The Wayfarers + Skype Q&A with director Goutam Ghose

Wed 26 May 20:45

### Closing Night: The Beatles and India + Q&A with directors Ajoy Bose and Peter Compton

Sun 6 Jun 15:15

---

## NEW RELEASES & RE-RELEASES

### First Cow

From Fri 28 May

### Surge

From Fri 28 May

### After Love

From Fri 4 Jun (Q&A with director Aleem Khan on Fri 4 Jun 17:30;

Q&A with director Aleem Khan and actor Joanna Scanlan on

Sun 13 Jun 18:40)

### Gunda

From Fri 4 Jun

### Fargo

From Fri 11 Jun

### The Reason I Jump

From Fri 18 Jun

### Nashville

From Fri 25 Jun

### Ultraviolence

From Sat 26 Jun

Sat 26 June 14:20 + Q&A with director Ken Fero and contributor Janet Alder

### Supernova

From Fri 2 Jul

### Another Round

From Fri 9 Jul

### Jumbo

From Fri 9 Jul

### Deerskin

From Fri 16 Jul

### Girlfriends

From Fri 23 Jul

### Mandabi

From Fri 23 Jul

## LONDON SHORT FILM FESTIVAL

### UK Competition 1: I Forgot More than You'll Ever Know

Sat 26 Jun 21:00

### UK Competition 3: Close Quarters

Fri 26 Jun 21:10

### UK Competition 2: The Double Life Of...

Mon 28 Jun 17:45

### UK Competition 4: Lessons in Survival

Tue 29 Jun 21:10

### UK Competition 5: The Devil's in the Details

Wed 30 Jun 17:50

## BFI PLAYER

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on [player.bfi.org.uk](https://player.bfi.org.uk)