

jonas åkerlund

Hyperactive, supersaturated, intensely in-your-face and larger than life, the work of film director Jonas Åkerlund is already established as instrumental in shaping our collective visual consciousness. The line-up of iconic superstars for whom he has created videos, films, and photographs reads like a who is who of contemporary idolatry: Madonna, The Rolling Stones, Lady Gaga, Beyoncé, Britney Spears, Rihanna, U2, Metallica, Blondie - the list is as endless as it is definitive, and if examined retrospectively, it becomes a portrait gallery preserving for posterity the most representative symbols of our celebrity infatuated civilization. In this respect, one could say that Åkerlund's work parallels Andy Warhol's, in the sense that their common fixation on glamorous surfaces unavoidably insinuates a commentary about the undercurrent values and aesthetics supporting the glitzy façade of 21st century cultural mythology.





However, Åkerlund goes some steps further than the Pope of Pop, as his imagery and narratives transcend the detached cynicism and coy aloofness of the latter: he does much more than just document and hint by directly confronting audience expectations and enveloping his subjects in a web of ornate stylizations while immersing his deceptively entertaining storylines within a provocative and quite often dark universe of extreme mannerisms and sinister shadows. Spiking the fame cocktail with a strong dose of gothic hallucinogens, Åkerlund belongs to the tradition of court artists whose work both deifies and critiques the royalty he immortalizes. In the following pages, read his exclusive interview for Nakedbutsafe

and enjoy a series of hitherto unpublished film-stills from the production of his "Small Apartments" movie.

Your work deals with the iconic on so many levels. Primarily, because every instance of it bursts with innumerable classic, cult, mainstream or underground, common or rare references, all of them visual provocations that titillate your obviously super-erudite and definitively hyperactive mind and charm devotees of the seductive image. Yet your work is also iconic in and of itself. It defines our era. We live in the Åkerlund times. Our collective daydreaming aesthetics have your trademark layering of mega-celebrities in Situationist extremis. Our culture is addicted to your proclivity for stylized gestures and mannered images. After watching an Åkerlund video, reality is forever warped. And considering Åkerlund videos are watched by hundreds of millions of people, you are influencing heavily a whole generation of voracious consumers of visuals. How do you feel as a 21st century cinematic guru?

JA: Haha, I wish I had someone read this to me every morning when I wake up to kick start my day. I don't feel like a guru but I'm proud of my work and even though I've been doing this for a long time I feel very young. I feel like I just started and have a lot more to give.

Your forays into film are amazingly entertaining, witty, and look as fresh today as 10 years ago, when you showed "Spun", your epic meth drama featuring super-legendary mega-stars like Deborah Harry, Mickey Rourke, the late Brittany Murphy, Jason Schwartzman, Mena Suvari, John Leguizamo, Patrick Fugit, Eric Roberts, and Chloe Hunter. I believe the world of feature films needs more Åkerlund films. What do you think?

JA: I have done 4 movies and my goal is definitely to do more. I've been a slow starter in movies but I'm gradually getting more and more confident in the role as movie director. I will shoot my next movie this spring. Spun was a long time ago but I'm still very proud it. It was life changing for me in many ways and it still has a life, which is what I wanted for this film, a long life.

I see almost all of film and photography history condensed in every one of your frames. From film noir dramatic lighting to silent-era shadows, from glamour icon publicity shots to paparazzi drama, everything seems to fascinate your eye. How do you cope with such exuberance of vision? Do you ever long for a simpler frame, a flatter surface, emptiness?

JA: Haha, I like this description. I've always seen myself as a wide range type of director. Every film I do is unique to me and needs whatever it takes to make an impact. I don't really study other films I always create based on the ideas I write.

Do you feel you belong to a school of visual maximalists, maybe stretching all the way back to Josef von Sternberg, including Jean Cocteau, Martin Scorsese, Sergei Parajanov, Alejandro Jodorofsky? How do you feel about being considered a "baroque" kind of film director, an artist who is quite fond of elaboration and excess?

JA: I feel I have my own way of approaching stories and telling stories. I've always been very in your face with how I do stuff. I do not see a reason for holding back. This was a unique way of telling stories when I started 20 years ago but now I see that this is what the audience is used to, a fast flow of images and more uptempo. I don't wanna compare my creativity to anyone. I didn't go to film school and I never really learned how to do what I'm doing. It came to me very naturally.

It's not just the lighting, the costumes or the directing, you are meticulous also when you edit and cut up your films. The end result, frantically involved and busy, somehow resembles the world as experienced by somebody on hallucinogenics or even suffering from mental illness. How important is the concept of altered perception, either chemically induced or of pathological origin? Do you find artificial or even clinical lunacy inspiring?

No, I don't get inspired like that; it all comes from me instinctively.

What is your educational journey? How have you learnt to be who you are, as an artist, today? Do you have people you consider your teachers, your guides, your mentors? Would you like to speak about these persons and how they influenced your progress?

JA: Anders Skog is my mentor and he was the director I worked for when I started and his attitude towards the film-making process was very inspiring. He took every detail very seriously and he was a master editor, way ahead of his time. Together we loved Jean Paul Goude, Mondino, Joe Pytka, Tony Kaye etc. It was an extremely productive time in Sweden

where you could practice shooting and editing with real paying clients. The commercials and these years was my film school.

Do you choose who you work with or after a certain career level you don't really need to because only the best people approach you?

JA: Most of the artists I work with today are artists I worked with before. I do choose who I work with but most of the times the idea and timing dictates if it happens or not. I have more projects then I have time to do. My motivation is always the idea.

Do you socialize much with the movie world in Los Angeles?

JA: The great thing about Los Angeles is that freaks from all over the world come here to be creative. It's a natural part of living here to meet and work with creative people from all over the world. So yes, I do hang with people not only from the movies but also musicians, designers, writers etc. Most creative people end up here sooner or later.

Is there really some kind of super-decadent party scene which goes on forever behind the glitz and glare of the premiere spotlights? Does the Helmut Newton / Bret Easton-Ellis side of Los Angeles really exist? In what ways do you feed on the social aspects of Los Angeles, especially the universe surrounding the movie and star industry?

JA: I do not party as much as I wish I did. There's a great party scene in LA but unfortunately my time doesn't permit this. I'm so fucking boring nowadays.

Do you ever feel the need to stop what you are doing and delve into a completely different state of mind? Does the frenetic pace of producing videos and movies ever become too much of an endurance test? If so, what mode of being or course of action do you choose as an escape?

JA: I feed and fuel from being productive, it's my life. I do not feel the need to do nothing or take traditional vacations, nothing in my life is traditional. With the job I have I get so much out of the need in life so if I do have time left I do nothing. I do feel my life is close to a change of priorities with longer projects, telling stories and directing movies right around the corner.

Do you have dream collaborations? There is a new generation of pop stars that look ideal for a Jonas Åkerlund clip – Ssion, Burger Girl, Mykki Blanco, Tobias Bernstrup. Or, there are older legends that you could re-imagine – Grace Jones, David Bowie or even Boy George spring to mind.

JA: I'm drawn to the older, more experienced, artist and mostly work with them, but always keep my eyes open for new talent. I've always loved the idea of taking artists out of their comfort zone, for example a collaboration between Madonna and Ghost would be great. I have Iggy sing on a Rammstein track, anything with Iggy is a dream though.

Are you an ambitious person? Do you care how your work is perceived? Would you do a project that would fall outside the parameters of huge names, legendary faces, and mythical brands? Could we ever expect an Åkerlund movie about an obscure, little-known person or subject?





JA: Since my work is very broad and I work with so many types of films, clients, and countries like Sweden, France, USA, etc... there's always a different reason and motivation. My hope is that all my work has my fingerprint on it but looking back I know where that fingerprint is stronger and where it is not even there. I'm very ambitious and treat all my work as equally important and always with 100% enthusiasm. A few times a year I try to do films that are only for me but with film being a complicated, expensive process you always have someone pay for it and then you must report back to someone. I do not care about what people think of my work as long as I've done my very best.

Are you at a place where you dreamt of being? Are there further horizons to be explored? Do you feel there is a pre-existing path in your work or do you let serendipity and circumstance inspire your decisions on which project to take on?

JA: I'm very pleased and happy with where I am in my life. I do better work than ever and I'm very proud to now be in constant production for over 20 years. My priority is slowly shifting from 25 projects a year to less quantity and in the future longer projects including writing and movies. I've never taken the movie part of my life seriously but now feel more mature and ready for it.

How hands on are you during the various stages of production? Are you the kind of director who oversees every detail or do you just show up on time and improvise?

JA: I'm involved in every detail of all my films, starting with conception to execution and all the way through postproduction. Nothing passes by without my approval or involvement.

How do you feel about the losing copyright control of your work? Are you comfortable with the fact that anybody with an internet connection can see a film of yours for free? Is the free distribution of material online helpful for the creator? Has the paradigm finally shifted or are we still in a dilemma about the issues of piracy, torrents etc.?

JA: I do not care, as a director I don't get paid anyways after I deliver the film. The good news is that a lot of people see your films, the bad news is that the quality and size of screen is usually shit. We spend a lot of time making our films look and sound beautiful and all this is lost on the internet. I do not support piracy in anyway and am always on the artists side.

Are you politically or socially conscious? How do you respond to our contemporary social realities? Do you support any causes? How? Would you donate your services to a cause you considered worthy of your time? Which one would it be?

JA: Through the years I've been doing a lot of ads supporting different causes and of course I'm socially conscious. I'm a

big fan of the Red organization and Madonna's work in Malawi and admire Jeffrey Sachs for his work, his book "The End Of Poverty" is a fantastic read.

Do you ever feel unexpectedly conservative, as if the modern world might change a little too fast for your liking or comfort? What aspects of our contemporary society worry or perplex you the most? When you ponder the future of humankind, are you a pessimist, an optimist or neither?

JA: I don't really care what's going on and try to go back to myself for inspiration. I'm not worried about what other people do or what's popular or trendy at the time.

As an artist you are enormously influential in a medium that affects whole generations of fans, since pop stars are much more than just pretty or interesting: they embody the zeitgeist. Do you ever feel philosophically or morally responsible when constructing these iconic facades? Have you ever stopped yourself from creating some mood or image because it might possibly affect your audience in a negative way?

JA: I always study the artist I work with to learn about what their DNA is. My jobs are not to change or make them something they are not but I do see myself as a director that takes them to places they haven't been to before. No one comes to me for a traditional video or job. I always wanna make something memorable and take the audience out of their safety zone. I suggest and create and the artist themselves must have the responsibly towards their audience, not me.

How important is saying "no"? What are your limits when accepting to collaborate with somebody? Are you a dominant leader or a team player? Are you willing to listen to other possibilities or are you driven by a very specific vision which you must materialize?

JA: I'm the Captain of the ship but always collaborate. There's no point of doing films for me, some artists are more involved than others and I'm fine with whatever way they wanna work with me. Collaborations are great and most of my best work in music videos are when I work closely with an artist.

Have there been moments when you are so impressed by the personality you are collaborating with that you found it difficult working with them? How easy is it to direct somebody who is part of our collective subconscious, like Mick Jagger? Or do you completely block their "famous" aura and treat them like any other unknown actor you might be directing in any commercial?

JA: I'm never affected by fame but admire someone who is genuine and driven. I could not treat anyone different because of celebrity. I treat everybody in front of the camera the same.

Sometimes even the locations you choose, like the Malaparte villa, immortalized by Godard, and used to great effect by you for Zegna, are monumental in their own right. It's as if you choose the setting so that myth saturates your imagery. Is this conscious on your part? Do you like these "secret stories" whispered in the background of your films?

JA: Location is very important and a great location can really set the tone of a film. I'm a sucker for old locations and always drawn to the seedy, rundown parts of the cities I work in. I love places with history and locations that look fucked up. I always prefer location before building on a stage.

Do you like the process of teaching? Do you surround yourself with people who are eager to know what you do or does this seem too constricting for your peace of mind?

JA: I started learning from a director who taught me all about telling stories in the edit, how to be effective in storytelling and all about style and look. He was great and the reason why I do what I do today. And, ever since I started I've been surrounded by people who learned from me, mostly Swedish people. The company I had in Stockholm was like a big school for many directors and editors. I still do it but in a different way. I am always looking for great talent to help me get stuff done. I'm lucky right now being surrounded by the best assistant team you can imagine.

Would you agree to film, on behalf of a corporate sponsor, a morally and politically controversial film depicting and promoting the Winter Olympics in Sochi, but not mentioning the legalized persecution of glbt people in Russia?

JA: I support anyone who wants to be true to who they are. I encourage anyone to stand up for what they believe in. I do not judge or hate, I am against any type of hate or discrimination. I'm for togetherness and equality and we must all understand that we are different and that things could look different from other perspectives.

How spiritual are you? Are you religious in any sense? How do you feel about this constant need to ascribe metaphysical truth in life or do you deny the existence any being of higher consciousness? Where do you stand in the divide nowadays manifested by the very vocal religious fanatics on the one side and the understandably irate atheists like Richard Dawkins on the other?

JA: Sweden is the least religious country in the world and I'm a 100% atheist, which I struggle with when the ghost in my Los Angeles house comes to visit me at night.

What is your relationship with the internet? Do you waste endless stretches of time clicking, reading, watching only to want more every day? Are you a digital addict?

JA: I'm a total computer and Internet junky. It's the only thing I have on my rider and can't live without. I'm only AFK when I sleep which is only about 3.5 hours a night. I don't own a TV so Internet is my source for staying in touch with the world. I get an average of 200 emails a day and reply to every single one.

How does heritage define you? Do you refer to your roots whenever you are in creative mode, replicate the fairy tales, mythologies and even national history through your work? And if you do, then how do you define the particulars of your expression? Do you believe you speak an international language as an artist or do you find valid the opinion that you express a very particularly American flavor of visual overload? Could you see your work defined as exotic in the sense that somebody like Wong Kar Wai is?

JA: Growing up in Stockholm is not an exotic look you wanna bring to films, I do, but there's a specific tone that I believe I have from my heritage. I've also been traveling all my life so I feel the mix of all the different cultures I know really well are reflected in my work. I don't feel Swedish in my style and look. It's more like a smorgasbord. I come from a gypsy background and I feel this explains some of my behaviors.

Apart from the world of images that you are involved in creating, are you interested and actively involved in other areas of interest beyond your own work, such as collecting art, sponsoring younger artists or even following a pursuit completely independent of the art process?

JA: I'm a big collector of books and antiques. I'm always surrounded by young talent that I like to help. I don't really get much out of it but I've always done it and will keep doing it.

Your imagery is not only beyond what one would consider mainstream but also larger than life. You seem eager to pervert, augment, and stylize everything. For example, even a simple set-up, like Beyoncé on the beach, becomes an extravaganza, with synchronized dancers floating acres of co-ordinated scarves and all manners of hyper-choreographed camera angles. Every frame follows a train of thought whose only aim seems to be extravagance. Is austerity repellent, against our contemporary aesthetic? In an era of constant image feeds, 3D extravaganzas and Instagram, does the eye need more and more to be seduced?

JA: I do see myself as pretty basic in my filmmaking but pay a lot of attention to details. Editing and sound is a big part of the overall look and feel in my films. I shoot a lot of footage to get the freedom to create in post. Film editing and sound can take you to places, make you feel in different ways and trick you to believe it's magic and my this is my favorite part of the process.

Do you have muses? Has there ever been a particular woman who inspired and led your creativity in a way that her being contributed an equal amount of content to the finished piece?

JA: I met my wife over ten years ago and she has not only taught me what true and real love is but also how to create character and develop stories. She has a tremendous talent that I learn from everyday.

How would you feel about doing a reality show? Are there people out there whose every day realities would be so inspiring as to grab your attention over a whole season? Which kind would they be – the purely self-regarding and fame for it's own sake kind, like Kim Kardashian or a personality whose image maybe isn't visible in the media but who is interesting and his/her story worth retelling nonetheless?

JA: I don't care about reality shows, I never did. I do love documentaries and a good documentary can make anything interesting. I would never do realty TV, I think it makes people stupid.







Your work focuses on crime with an affection that is morally ambivalent. It is pretty clear that some Åkerlund characters and environments are of the unsavory kind, even dark. What is it about the illegal that attracts you? Do you appreciate the heavy, heady atmospheres and dramas of humanity on the edge of survival and experience seen in Jean Genet or Pier Paolo Pasolini or even Rainer Werner Fassbinder? Do you see yourself in line with these film makers?

JA: I wish I could say I'm in line with those great filmmakers, I'm very humbled. I am fascinated by what is real and what is going on behind the facade of humanity, whatever that might be, sometimes it's very dark and unfortunately there's more darkness in our world than there should be.

How possible is it that we will ever see a Jonas Åkerlund science-fiction extravaganza? Does the idea interest you? What kind of sci-fi would it be? Would you go for something brainy like Tarkovsky or Kubrick or something very lush and super-designed like Pacific Rim?

JA: If I ever did a sci-fi it would probably be about the fucked up side of space, nothing too fancy, just the backside we've never seen before, the drugs they do in the future or how they deal with freaks, there must be a dark side of sci-fi and not just super humans.

What are you reading, watching, and listening to at the moment? Is there space for the input of new information or does your work absorb you so much that you find it hard to keep up with what you want to experience of other peoples' work?

JA: For a top secret reason I'm now reading Lords of Chaos for the tenth time and I'm listening to Dead can Dance. I mostly read scripts and I always have a pile I'm supposed to read. I have dyslexia so reading is always a challenge for me. I wish I could read a book a day and watch a movie a day.

What advice would you give to somebody who is young and idolizes you?

JA: Not sure. I do talk a lot to the younger people that work for me. I'm starting to sound like an old man telling stories about how great it all used to be. I'm not even convinced young creative people need advice today. Their circumstances are so different than it used to be. It's easy to actually practice and do your own films. I guess the best thing is to just stay as busy as you can. Nothing worse than a creative person who is not active and just talks. I always did the opposite; I never talked about my jobs just worked.

What would your desert island audiovisual library include?

JA: My family photo album.

What would you say is an unexpected character trait of yours?

JA: Extremely good sense of direction.

Do you thrive in chaos or do you go for serenity when working?

JA: I have an extremely organized chaos in my life, close to perfection.

Do you have a defining moment when you told yourself "I will be a movie director" or is your success the result of choices not entirely conscious? Is there a parallel universe where you could have ended up doing something else? What would that be?

JA: I stopped playing drums the day I discovered film editing. I was a half ass drummer but felt I could master editing, it was a very natural transition and I never looked back at the drums again. I never saw myself as a director. I was the editor on set making sure we got all the footage and elements to make a perfect edit, took me years before I realized this is being a director..

How conscious are you of the underground American film-makers like Jack Smith, Kenneth Anger, the Kuchar Brothers or early John Waters? Do you see your oeuvre following down their path of home-grown psychedelia, hand-crafted surrealism and random artifice? How much of a '60s situationist are you?

JA: I cannot identify myself with any of these directors but have huge respect for anyone with integrity. Being a filmmaker and holding on to your integrity and believing in what you do is rare and very difficult. I hope I can say I do and my plan is to hold on to this for as long as I do this.

I know you prefer to work with a specific group of people. How important is for you the notion of a professional family?

JA: My crew is my family. I was always very loyal to my team and most people I work with I've worked with for many years, a few all the way back since I started. I'm very productive so most of my team works exclusively with me so with this comes a responsibility from both ends of the relationship, we can never stop evolving and developing and variety is key. And, I only work with nice people, keeping it nice and calm is my thing.

What is your relationship with fear? How do you manage anxiety?

JA: I have no fear and no anxiety.

How important is music to you? Could you live without it?

JA: I do appreciate silence more now than I ever did. I think I've been listening to too much music in my life. I think I OD'd on it a few years ago. I still listen all the time but it's not as important as it use to be, but of course it plays a huge importance in my life.

Would you ever do a fashion film?

JA: I don't wanna do a fashion film but I would love to create fashion in my films.

Would you ever direct a video game?

JA: Probably not.

Do you follow contemporary art? Do you have any favorite artist?

JA: I love Olivier de Sagazan, Thomas Schutte, Sofia Hulten, Wade Guyton, John Duncan, Nathalie Djurberg to name few.