

The sky is clear and all shadows have flown away ... Knut Göte Ekström (1938-2007) in memoriam

By Peter I. Crawford (NAFA Treasurer) (interven@inet.uni2.dk)

The Nordic world of ethnographic film and visual anthropology in general, and NAFA in particular, were struck by sorrow to learn that one of its pioneers, Knut Ekström, had passed away on the 16 December 2007, following an uphill struggle against terminal cancer. Those of us privileged to have known him well could hardly imagine that we in the future would no longer sense his normally quiet, yet striking, presence at NAFA



events and in other international contexts in which we had enjoyed his company, sense of humour, and formidable humanistic approach to what is wrong and right in the world he has now left. To us it came as no surprise that his death notice in Swedish national newspapers was illustrated with the international symbol of peace.

Knut was well ahead of the 1968 student revolts, the anniversary of which is celebrated at the moment, when it came to an anti-authoritarian stance and an almost rebellious human nature. Personally I know from Knut himself, as well as from Swedish friends of his, that he evaded many a rule during his time as a serviceman in the Swedish air force in the 1950s. He was almost mentally allergic to any degree of bureaucracy and people emitting signs of unfounded power and bigotry. In many ways he reflected the part of Stockholm, Söder (the South Side), in which he lived most of his life and where he had made a four-part documentary film series, with its strong mixture of traditional working-class culture and an intellectual and artistic air of cosmopolitanism and *bon vivants*. Knut was perhaps too much part of the Söder intelligentsia to be described as 'salt of the earth' but he was always on the side of the weakest, the outcasts, the have-nots, and the free spirits. On the other hand, his intrinsic sense of tolerance and empathy extended even to people which many of us loathed for varying reasons. In this sense Knut was probably what one may describe as the quintessential humanist, always focusing on the good sides of people.

This could be detected in his warm though often satirical sense of humour, emphasising his natural inclination to laugh with people while hating those who laughed at people. This was the case, for example, when he once rather loudly commented on the entry of three smartly dressed NAFA 'ladies' (no names mentioned) during the lunch break of one of our festivals by saying: "Here we have the ladies that rattle with their jewellery."

Knut was a man of many talents and it was not necessarily written in the cards that he were to become an anthropologist. Actually he was embarking on a career as a journalist when his interest in other cultures and travel brought social anthropology to his attention. He conducted fieldwork (Knut would probably prefer to say that he had travelled a bit) in the United States and this kicked off his interest in the growing field of urban anthropology, not to mention a fascination (rather than admiration) of American culture and his adopting an American twang to his English that never disappeared (despite the efforts of among others yours sincerely to rectify this). Becoming an anthropologist he dedicated almost the rest of his life to the study and documentation of his own urban neighbourhood in Söder. This coincided with his strong and growing interest in visual images and film.

Knut's career as an ethnographic and documentary filmmaker really started in the early 1980s, at the same

time as he was increasingly becoming one of the most important figures in the development of NAFA and visual anthropology (a term we had not really adopted yet at the time) in the Nordic countries. He initially worked closely together with his good friend and colleague, Mona Rosendahl, with whom he made the film *Pinnarävar* (1983), a film about workers in the wood industry in Bodafors in Sweden, based on an observational portrayal of the everyday lives of five workers from a furniture factory. This first professional attempt as a filmmaker to understand the lives of very different people was soon followed by the first film in what was to become a series about various aspects of life in Söder. The first film, *Blod och eld* (1986, Blood and fire) was about the Salvation Army, the social work of which among those less-off in Söder is apparent to anyone who has visited the area, especially if being guided round by Knut himself. For the rest of his life he was intrigued by the unselfish work of the Salvation Army, and its religious basis, and almost knew the history of the army by heart. Even at Knut's funeral his deep-felt respect for the 'soldiers' was reflected in the choice of 'Let us gather at the river' as one of the hymns sung.

Knut was a true anthropologist in the sense that when his interest in something was caught he ventured into it with all cylinders firing. This was also the case with the second film of the series, *I kolonin* (1987, The allotment garden), a fine description of how an allotment garden, in this case Eriksdalslunden, right in the city centre, constitutes a kind of sub-culture, but with rules and norms not entirely dissimilar to those of the world around it. Needless to say, Knut acquired his own lot in the allotment garden, situated less than half a mile from

his home. The film focuses on the 'queen' of the allotment garden, Göta, aged 83 (marking another interest triggered in Knut, that of old age. He was since the making of this film often talking about the need to develop what he called a 'visual gerontology'), whose eyes could detect weed emerging before they were visible to other humans. Knut, who was normally rather critical towards the use of non-ambient sound in ethnographic film, (rather cliché-like) decided to use Vivaldi's Four Seasons to mark the changing seasons of life in the garden.

The two final films of the series were more about 'modern' aspects of Söder, the third film, *Social Servicecentral 5* (1989), following the modern institution of the social welfare office, seen through both the eyes of the staff and those of its clients. This is an almost Wisemanesque film, questioning whether our institutions are actually conceived, designed, structured and staffed in a way that really matches the needs of the winos and drug addicts that form part of its client group. Finally, part four of the series, *En stadsdel föds* (1995, The birth of a part of a city), historically looks into the development of a particular part of Söder whilst documenting the recent re-development of the area with the construction of postmodernist architecture housing.

The end of the film series coincided with the major imminent changes in documentary film technology, Knut belonging to the last generation of 16 mm filmmakers just before the advent of digital video technology. Not that Knut was against new technology, quite the contrary; he embraced it and took an interest in the emerging platforms of multimedia and digital

audio-visual media, becoming involved in several museum-based projects, such as a multimedia project on the expeditions of the Swedish explorer, A.F. Nordenskiöld, who navigated the ship Vega from northern Norway to the Bering Strait from 1878-1880, thus discovering the so-called North-East Passage.

Knut served NAFA for almost thirty years and was a long-standing member of the working committee, having acted as treasurer for many years. Personally, I am proud and happy to have known Knut and have many fond memories of our time together, especially from the long period of time in NAFA's history, from the mid-1980s to early 1990s, in which the organisation on a day-to-day basis was run by Heimo Lappalainen, Knut and I. Being part of NAFA has often been described as 'joining the NAFA family', and losing Knut, who at the time of his death still served as one of the auditors of the accounts, is a bit like losing a family member, although the loss for his real family, Birgitta, Tora, Frederik and Jens, is of course even worse, and we cannot but express our sincerest condolences. I am perfectly aware that one cannot express the full extent of one's feelings in a written obituary (I am sure Knut would have found the medium of film more appropriate) but hope that these brief thoughts on Knut and NAFA's life together do him justice. The title of the obituary, by the way, is the final sentence of a recent official letter Knut, who was really, really pissed off by the fact that the Chinese organisers of an event had failed to reimburse his travel expenses as promised, sent to a renowned professor: 'The sky is clear and all shadows have flown away'. As you can see, Knut also had a profoundly poetic side to him. And he got his money back.