

EUPHORIA FILM PRESENTS

A FILM BY VIRPI SUUTARI

# ONCE UPON A TIME IN A FOREST

EUPHORIA FILM PRESENTS A VIRPI SUUTARI FILM "ONCE UPON A TIME IN A FOREST"  
IDA KORHONEN • MINKA VIRTANEN • OTTO SNELLMAN • VILLE MURMANN • OTSO PIITULAINEN  
CINEMATOGRAPHY TEEMU LIAKKA F.S.C. • JANI KUMPULAINEN F.S.C. EDITING JUSSI RAUTANIEMI F.C.E. MUSIC SANNA SALMENKALLIO  
SOUND DESIGN OLLI HUHTANEN PRODUCERS VIRPI SUUTARI • MARTTI SUOSALO DIRECTED & WRITTEN BY VIRPI SUUTARI

EUPHORIA FILM yle ALJAZEERA SVE RIVER OUTLOOK B/PLAN



# ONCE UPON A TIME IN A FOREST

Finland, 2024, 93 min.

a film by  
Virpi Suutari

## PRESS NOTES

**World premiere**  
CPH:DOX 2024  
DOX:AWARD  
International Competition

Press materials can be downloaded [HERE](#)

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# Logline

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An unconventional love song to forests, biodiversity and today's radical, environmentally aware youth.

# Short synopsis

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***Once Upon a Time in a Forest*** is a cinematic ode to a group of young radicals striving to defend Finland's forests against the vested interests of the forestry industry and the political system, demonstrating that the outcome of this Once Upon a Time story – happily ever after or ecological disaster – rests largely on the shoulders of young activists like Minka, Ida and their comrades.



# Long synopsis

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Finland's coniferous forests, along with those of Sweden, act as the lungs of Europe. Despite this, some ninety percent of Finland's forests are in acute danger from logging, even though scientists say forest conservation is one of the biggest things we can do to avoid biodiversity loss and save the planet.

***Once Upon a Time in a Forest*** is a cinematic ode to a group of young radicals striving to defend Finland's forests. In doing so, Ida, Minka, Otto and their activist friends come up against the vested interests of the forestry industry and political system, and a deeply rooted ideology of the forest as a major foundation of Finland's economic prosperity. Even though the young activists are involved in consultation processes (unlike in many other European countries), these do not bear fruit, and they decide to take direct action. Even if the Finnish police and judicial system are not as heavy handed as elsewhere, it is clear the dedicated young activists face an uphill struggle.

Award-winning director Virpi Suutari follows this new grassroots environmental movement through secret strategy meetings, actions and heartbreaking moments in what is left of nature. We witness 28-year-old Minka start to discover the wonders of the forest as she swims with perch, and 22-year-old Ida commune with Siberian jays before taking on a leadership role, opposing logging operations in the harsh winter conditions of Lapland.

The film ultimately bears powerful witness to how change is inevitably coming, and how the outcome of this *Once Upon a Time* story – happily ever after or ecological disaster – rests largely on the shoulders of young activists like Minka, Ida and their comrades.



# About the director

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## Virpi Suutari

Virpi Suutari (b.1967) is an award-winning filmmaker known for her personal cinematic style challenging the boundaries between fact and fiction. Her films have been shown in the major festivals such as IDFA, Locarno, Leipzig, Vision du Réel and Gothenburg Film festival.

***The Idle Ones*** (2001) was nominated for the Best European Documentary (EFA award) and she has won several awards as the Best Nordic Documentary in Nordisk Panorama. Suutari has received the Finnish national Academy award, the Jussi-Award, three times. She is also the member of the European Film Academy.

The previous feature documentary she directed and produced a feature documentary about architect Alvar Aalto (***Aalto***, 2020) received world-wide distribution.



## Selected filmography

**Once Upon A Time In A Forest** (2024) 93 Min

**A People's Radio – Ballads From A Wooded Country** (2021) 26 Min

**Aalto** (2020) 104 Min

**Entrepreneur** (2018) 78 Min

**Elegance** (2016) 26 Min

**Garden Lovers** (2014) 85 Min

# Interview with director Virpi Suutari

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by Marta Bałaga, March 2024

**You are surrounded by young people in this film. Was it hard to convince them to trust you?**

There is a lot of prejudice against activists and a lot of hatred towards them. I think it has to do with the simple fact that they make us feel guilty. We all know we are not doing enough. I do too.

They didn't know me as a documentary filmmaker, but one of the girls said: "I was asked to be in three documentaries, but I chose yours" [laughter]. You always want to be enchanted by the people you film. It was a beautiful group of youngsters.

It was a challenge to film them, however, and we talked about it a lot with my cinematographer Teemu Liakka. Luckily, he is used to filming nature: he has done nature documentaries *Tale of a Lake* and *The Tale of the Sleeping Giants*. We had to figure out how to follow them without disturbing their work. And how to keep up with them, because sometimes, they were moving so fast!

They started to trust us quite early on. Teemu is interested in nature and they respected that, while my sound designer Pirkko Tiitinen was actually studying to become a nature surveyor at that time. They already knew so much, weren't afraid of difficult conditions and wanted to learn even more. It was crucial, because I needed people who knew how to move in nature. Teemu can jump into the water without even disturbing its surface and film a frog. He has these skills.

**There are moments here that are very quiet – they are in a forest together, appreciating nature in complete silence. Why did you want to include them?**

So many people are afraid of activists and environmentalists, so it was important to "lure" the viewers this way. Through such moments, it's easier to understand their message. If they would just talk from the beginning until the end, no one would listen.

Ida, one of the characters, kept talking about her love for the forest. It's real, it's strong, it's almost physical. It's a really immersive experience for her and we kept that in mind. This film is a love story, but the object of your affection is the forest.



I guess I wanted to remind everyone how it felt when we were younger and our minds were still pure. Hopefully, when you recognize yourself in these youngsters, you can feel more empathy towards them. This human side is something you don't always see in films about activism, because they want to seem credible, but I tried to capture the way this generation reflects on things. I saw their almost child-like honesty and straightforwardness, and then I saw them behaving like strategic leaders, leading their troops to a battle. As a filmmaker, you are so intrigued by such contradictions.

**They are still figuring things out, wondering how they should express themselves in order to be heard. But they are not backing down.**

It's a very beautiful, brave moment when they go to meet the forest industry people and all of a sudden Minka starts asking all these "silly" questions. Questions we all want to ask, but we don't dare, because we are afraid someone will ridicule us. The thing is, these are fundamental questions and we need to ask them as citizens: "What do we want to do with our forests?" Sometimes it feels that unless you are an "expert," you are not allowed to talk about certain topics. But I have opinions too – I feel that we shouldn't be cutting them down to this extent, that it's not right. We have to stop it. The scientists have been saying that, the researchers, but when activists repeat the exact same thing, they are being silenced by someone who says: "You don't know enough about this subject."

**Women know this kind of situation only too well and one of the girls addresses it too. She says that men continue to explain things to her. The only thing that changes is the length of their beards.**

When you think about it, all the people in power shown in the film are men. And then you have these young female and non-binary people, questioning them. My daughter, who is 18, said to me: "Mom, you made a very feminist film." She also noticed the boys who were acting differently, who weren't interested in toxic masculinity at all.

**When I was a child, activists used to be older. Now, all these youngsters are fighting for a better future. Why do you think it's the case?**

I think it has to do with education. It does seem that younger people are so aware of these things. For me, this film was necessary. I am 56 years old now and I really needed it to educate myself, to get in touch with this new generation. We need to keep our mind open and learn. We can't become overly cynical – we have to support

them when they are protesting and it's our duty to become more radical too. I think I used to be this way when I was younger, then everyday life took over. Now, my children are older and I can afford to be radical again.

Still, when you are making a film about socio-political issues, you have to remember you are a filmmaker first. You are not a teacher. I don't want to teach – I want to inspire people to think about these issues and to have more sympathy towards people who are dedicating their lives to them.

### **Finland is famous for its nature. Is the situation really becoming worse?**

What shocked me, and I wasn't the only one, was that we are logging so much. It has been going on for decades. After the Second World War we needed the funds, but now, as a result, our forests are not diverse enough. There is a big fight between the government, Greenpeace and other environmental associations, trying to figure out what constitutes a natural forest you can protect. The fear is that the definition will be so narrow, it will enable all these companies to continue logging. Finland is still the most forested country in Europe, but what's the quality of our forests? That is the question as well.

### **Some people still believe that a forest can't be “unused” – just like the grandfather of one of your protagonists. He grew up with these narratives, so how do you change his mind?**

It's very difficult. I remember that mantra too. My parents met in one of these logging places as well. It was such a big national movement, visible in pop culture as well – a lumberjack was our superhero, our sex symbol. There were so many films about them.

We are living in the past, thinking that if we start restricting the forest industry, the whole welfare society will collapse. But it's not the case. We need to protect certain areas and I needed to include this conversation in the film to underline it. These people didn't do it because they were evil – after the war, it was a question of survival. These activists are also on the workers' side, but they are criticizing existing structures and political decisions. The past is the past, but we know better now.

### **In so many films about activism, violence is front and center. You show a calmer version of such events.**

I didn't want to preach and I didn't want to show too many demonstrations, but it's

true – in this film, police officers remind you of Fargo. I know that many activists have completely different experiences, but that's what I saw and I found it refreshing. There is so much aggression and hatred, also on social media, that it's almost surprising when no one is yelling. We weren't actively looking for such moments – they just happened. Like when Ida tries to stop logging and ends up having a very polite conversation with the man in charge.

I come from a generation that used to respect and perhaps also fear the police. Through this film, I got rid of this fear. It will sound ridiculous, but I can talk to them now. It's not all rosy, but in general, Finland is a good country to protest, especially if you compare it to some of its neighbors.

### **Was there a personal reason for making this film?**

My mother died two years ago and I inherited a small forest. With my sister, we started to think about what we could do with it. That's when I realized there is this whole new movement now, all these young people fighting to protect them. I was dealing with my own sorrow and learning more about this topic, suddenly reminded of the beauty of being radical.

Since then, this movement has only grown, but I was there at the very beginning. I am so grateful to the documentary gods for it. At first, I was thinking about making a film based on archival footage, about looking at the history of the environmental movement in Finland. But once I got to know these youngsters, they just took over the film. Now, I only include two such scenes, in order to establish that whole context. After all, they are not coming from nowhere. This fight has been going on for a while.

### **You clearly believe in their fight, so was it harder to keep your distance?**

When you make this kind of film, the question is: "How do I not become one of them?" I was dealing with this all the time.

We spent so much time together and they allowed me to join their private discussion groups. Sometimes, it was hard to draw the line, but I kept saying to them: "To make this film as good as possible, I have to keep an outsider's perspective." I also consulted a law firm, because when you hear about something on the verge of being illegal, what are your responsibilities then? It was probably the most difficult film I have ever done, because they have such a clear goal. As a director, you certainly don't want to betray it.

# Credits

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Directed & Written by	Virpi Suutari
Cinematography	Teemu Liakka F.S.C. Jani Kumpulainen F.S.C.
Editing	Jussi Rautaniemi F.C.E.
Sound Design	Olli Huhtanen
Original Music by	Sanna Salmenkallio
Production Company Producers	Euphoria Film Oy Virpi Suutari & Martti Suosalo
Starring	Ida Korhonen Minka Virtanen Otto Snellman Ville Murmann Otso Piitulainen Anja Pääkkönen Tauno & Leena Korhonen

