

**“What we do is not art, it is definitely storytelling”:
An interview with producer Thomas Hellum
on NRK’s *Minutt for minutt* television series¹
C. Claire Thomson²**

A seven-hour train journey from Oslo to Bergen; twenty-four hours of salmon fishing on the first day of the season; a sixty-hour marathon of psalm-singing; 134 hours aboard a coastal ferry. “Slow TV” has emerged as the label for a series of long-duration programmes showcasing Norway’s landscape and traditions, conceived in 2009 as an experiment for NRK, the national public service broadcaster. Most of these shows have attracted over one million viewers, a fifth of the Norwegian population. In 2013, Slow TV (or *sakte-tv* in Norwegian) was declared Word of the Year by the Norwegian Language Council, and NRK’s international publicity webpage for the series also adopts this term as its title (NRK 2014). As a brand, Slow TV is useful as a marketing tool in an era of slow cinema, slow food, and anglophone fascination with cosy Scandinavian lifestyle concepts such as *hygge* (see Thomson 2016). Focusing on the ostensible slowness of the programmes, however, tends to elide what is genuinely radical about the series: the long duration of these televisual events, and the implications of their length for their design, production, broadcasting, consumption and reception. Indeed, the interest of the producers in experimenting with duration as opposed to pace is implicit in the Norwegian name for the series: *Minutt for minutt* (minute by minute).

In this conversation, commissioned for this theme issue of *Aniki*, producer Thomas Hellum explains the concepts, principles,

¹ This is an edited transcript of a Skype interview, conducted for *Aniki* on 19 May 2017. Thomas Hellum has worked at NRK Hordaland since 1992. The former lighting designer moved into photography and then began work as a producer, specializing in documentaries. In 2009, he became one of the driving forces behind the Slow TV movement, filming and broadcasting apparently boring events as they happen and turning them into television. In 2008, Hellum won the Grand Prix Golden Prague at the International Television Festival in Prague for the documentary *Ballad for Edvard Grieg*, which tracked the composer’s travels through Europe. He also won the Rose d’Or Award for *The Sound of Ole Bull* at the Rose d’Or Festival in Lucerne in 2012. His personal motto is: “Life is best when it’s a bit strange”. The Slow TV program *Hurtigruten minute by minute* recieved the TV-award Gullruten in 2012. More about Slow TV: nrk.no/slowtv

² C. Claire Thomson, Senior Lecturer in Scandinavian Film at UCL, School of European Languages, Culture & Society, Department of Scandinavian Studies, WC1E 6BT, London, United Kingdom.

and working methods behind *Minutt for minutt*. Ultimately, he insists, the extreme duration of many of the programmes is a function of the principles and culture of public service broadcasting in Norway. The slowness of Slow TV has little in common with the slowness of Slow Cinema. *Minutt for minutt* is not about art, says Hellum – it is about storytelling.

Aniki: Your productions are often called Slow TV, but this does not quite capture the essence of the programmes, does it? The Norwegian title of the series, *Minutt for minutt*, seems to emphasise not just long duration, but also the very moments captured in all their detail by the camera.

Thomas Hellum: “Slow TV” was not part of the original concept of the series. The term first began to be used in connection with the *Hurtigruten* broadcast in 2011, the 134-hour transmission of the coastal voyage from Bergen to Kirkenes. From the first broadcast in 2009, which recorded the train journey from Oslo to Bergen, we used the name *Minutt for minutt* – minute-by-minute. With that title, we wanted to communicate the principle that the broadcasts themselves and the images within them would last a long time. There might be boring stretches, just as there are on a real journey. For the viewers, there is also a parallel with the experience they might have in a museum – you watch for a long time and make your own story out of what you see.

Aniki: That’s fascinating. So, the viewers are being brought face-to-face with journeys and processes they might not otherwise encounter, but via the medium of television, and they are being asked to dwell in that encounter.

Thomas Hellum: The principle of broadcasting minute-by-minute is actually embedded in the five rules that we have developed to underpin the series. The first rule is that there should be an unbroken timeline. Whatever is being filmed should not be edited. This means that the boring parts of the journey or the process are included. The second rule is that the programme should be broadcast live if possible. Sometimes this is not feasible - if a train journey involves a lot of tunnels, for example. But broadcasting the journey live establishes a contract with the viewer. The viewer knows that what he or she is seeing is real, and that whatever happens next is authentic.

Aniki: Your use of the term “contract” seems crucial.

Thomas Hellum: What keeps people watching seems to be the feeling of “being there” in the place or on the journey being filmed. The experience of waiting is also important. Our rule about not cutting is key to these things. That’s what creates a sense of anticipation. Actually, though, the principle of broadcasting live was not established until the first programme had screened. Our first production in 2009, *Bergensbanen minutt for minutt*, the seven-hour

train journey from Oslo to Bergen, was pre-recorded. We used four cameras and edited the journey together with local information, added graphics, and so on. Our team was on the train during the shoot, and at one of the stations, a local journalist came down to talk to us. It struck us that if more people knew that we were filming, the programmes would function differently. The next one had to be live. The next year, we tested out the concept and the technology with shorter live transmissions of the scenic railway journey down the mountain to the village of Flåm, and one from the Oslo subway. Then in 2011, we produced the live broadcast of the 134-hour coastal ferry journey from Oslo to Kirkenes, the so-called *Hurtigruten*. We had actually come up with that idea the same night that *Bergensbanen minutt for minutt* was broadcast.

Aniki: In some ways, these principles take us back to early cinema: single-shot films, spectacle, phantom rides produced by filming from the front of trains...



Image 1: Filming the route ahead in *Bergensbanen minutt for minutt* (*Bergensbanen Minute by Minute*, 2009) | © NRK

Thomas Hellum: But the third rule is that the programmes are made for television. The images of landscape in particular are made for a television-sized screen, not for the Internet. The landscape images have a particular kind of beauty, and some viewers just enjoy the reassuring experience of having such images in their living room. Other viewers are more interested in the information provided by voiceover and graphics during the programmes, local history, for example. Either way, screening on television means that

people can gather around, sit on the sofa; the programmes become a collective event.

Aniki: And viewers are very aware that they are simultaneously participating in a national event, aren't they?

Thomas Hellum: Connected to that awareness is our fourth rule: that the programmes must be scheduled in prime time. We are proud of our stories and we think they are important. In Denmark, for example, a similar railway journey has been aired, but hidden away at 6 a.m. on a Sunday. For us, *Minutt for minutt* should have pride of place in NRK's schedule. Most of our programmes are rooted in Norwegian culture, whether it is a journey people know or might want to experience, or a subject, or an activity like knitting or bonfire-building. We can tell these stories in many ways, but it must be a story. And that is the fifth rule underlying *Minutt for minutt*: each programme has to tell a story that is worth telling. This is not just watching paint dry or ice melting, but real stories being told.

Aniki: So, these are flagship programmes. Could you say something about the production process, the production values?

Thomas Hellum: *Minutt for minutt* has very high production values. It's shot in HD with the best cameras and the latest equipment. For the 134-hour coastal ferry journey, we used eleven cameras and built a control room on the ferry. On board, we carried everything we needed along the way: including all the music, a printer, and a Wi-Fi system for some of the cameras. One very advanced camera was mounted on the front of the ship to capture sea-level images, and it could be raised and lowered depending on the weather. We used a gyrostabilised Cineflex camera to capture steady pictures at long distances, of people on the shore. All of this is comparable to how NRK would cover a major sporting event. We use the same standard of equipment and build our own control rooms for the Olympics, for example.

Aniki: You have already touched on how *Minutt for minutt* is consumed by audiences in Norway, but perhaps we could look at that more closely. Do some viewers dip in and out of the event while going about their weekend business? Beyond the cosy gatherings around the television, the programmes are also streamed on the web, aren't they?



Image 2: Captain Geir Johannesen is filmed during *Hurtigruten minutt for minutt* (*Hurtigruten Minute by Minute*, 2011) | © NRK

Thomas Hellum: It's notable that the length of a broadcast affects audience growth and behaviour. With the seven- or twelve-hour events, there is discussion afterwards over the coffee machine or on Twitter. Audience figures are summarised on NRK's Slow TV press webpage (NRK 2014). With the longer events, we notice that audience attention grows during the broadcast, especially once it hits the twenty-four-hour mark. With the *Hurtigruten* coastal voyage, for example, people knew the route. Some people set their alarm for 3 a.m. so that they could catch a glimpse on television of a place that meant something to them, or they would go down to their local harbour and greet the ship when it docked. We actually divided the television schedule for the broadcast up into seventy-eight blurbs, based on the ferry's timetable. We also created an interactive map online so that people could mark places they knew or wanted to see along the ferry route. Unfortunately, that website is currently offline, but there are plans to reinstate it. We harvested viewers' tweets before they were deleted, as well as posts from the webpage and elsewhere - there were around 60,000 comments on Facebook. Media scholars have conducted research into some of our innovations with social media around *Minutt for minutt* and the use of social media by our audiences (Puijk 2015), and there is a very active scholarly blog (Slow TV Blog 2017).

Aniki: The coastal ferry voyage, then, seems to have been a high-water mark for the series. That's when it turned into a phenomenon that was at once national and profoundly local, and also became a social media sensation. But could we go back to the very beginning of *Minutt for minutt*? How was the idea first conceived?

Thomas Hellum: It began as a crazy idea, the sort of idea you come up with in the pub. It made us laugh, and it made the commissioning editors laugh, too. At first, they didn't understand how long the programmes would be. Then they started to laugh in a more positive way. Our commissioning editors' attitude toward risk was interesting: they moved quickly from wondering what the risk would be for NRK if it commissioned this production, to thinking about what NRK would risk by turning down this crazy idea that came from its employees. My colleagues and I have often remarked that we have the world's most innovative and risk-taking commissioning editors.

Aniki: It's very interesting that you highlight both laughter and risk as drivers in your account of the origins of the series.

Thomas Hellum: Laughter and risk have also been central to how the series has developed. The first programme, with the journey from Oslo to Bergen, was a risk. The coastal ferry was certainly a risk. But these were “firsts”, and the first time cannot be repeated; in a way, this fact is our biggest enemy. With every new idea for a broadcast, we have to re-discover the energy again; we have to counteract the tendency for *Minutt for minutt* to feel more and more like natural storytelling. In May 2016, just last year, we did a twelve-hour broadcast from Saltstraumen, the world's strongest tidal stream, and that felt like a natural thing to tell a story about, even though, on the face of it, it's a radical idea we wouldn't have dreamt of doing some years ago. So, we have to keep pushing the boundaries to make sure that the stories don't become too predictable, for us or for the viewers. Once a year, we hold a meeting - a dinner, actually - with the commissioning editors to discuss new ideas. We call it the Transport Strategic Seminar Dinner.

Aniki: So, each new concept has to play with the long duration that is at the heart of *Minutt for minutt* - that's what holds the series together as a series and as a concept - but you also have to keep renewing that central concept. I've been looking at the NRK webpage which previews the Saltstraumen broadcast you just mentioned (Grut 2015). It was posted about six months before the scheduled broadcast, and it whets the audience's appetite by describing the programme as “hardcore” Slow TV. It specifies a wish-list of innovations beyond the established multi-camera production: a kilometre-long wirecam rig over the tidal stream, an underwater robot, floating GPS-trackers to be sent downstream to show how the water moves, and a plan to build a 3D model of the fjord in WebGL. The page also invites people to contribute ideas, and attracted sixty comments with requests and suggestions. The technological innovations associated with the programmes, then, actually seem to be part of the thrill for at least some viewers.

Thomas Hellum: The technological challenges can shape the story as well. The challenges often stem from duration. After the first few train journeys we filmed, we knew that we wanted to broadcast *Minutt for minutt* from Nordlandsbanen, the famous train journey north of the Arctic Circle. But the problem was that there are 153 tunnels along that railway line, so a live version would have involved too much time in the dark. In 2012, we did produce that journey, but in a different way: the programme is not just minute-by-minute, but also season-by-season. It's a ten-hour trip, so that aspect of the broadcast was in real time, but we filmed the journey over the four seasons and included them all.

Aniki: What an ingenious way to develop the *Minutt for minutt* concept, but also expand it. It's real time, but not linear time. It's dependent for its effect on that contract with the viewer you mentioned earlier: that they are witnessing the passage of real, unedited moments, except in this case there is an extra layer of time, the cycle of the seasons. That's a complex contract!

Thomas Hellum: There are other aspects of that contract with the viewer. When we develop a new idea, we always ask ourselves whether it's right to spend television license money on it. It must be something that viewers in Norway might like, that they might identify with. And there is a kind of cultural obligation involved: this spring we have been working on a show about reindeer herding, and that reflects our duty of care to Saami culture, for example.

Aniki: Is that duty of care for national culture articulated in a policy document, or is it more a question of the workplace culture at NRK?

Thomas Hellum: The culture comes naturally. NRK has about 3,500 employees, and we know that it is an important institution. One of our tasks is to constantly re-tell the story of Norwegian culture.

Aniki: When Norwegian Slow TV is discussed over here in the UK, it's often said that the concept reflects Norwegian culture and could only happen in Norway. This seems to me to be really problematic, romanticising and essentialising Norwegian culture as being close to nature or quintessentially slow. But what's your take on that idea, as a Norwegian? Is this a local expression of a global phenomenon, a return to slowness and duration?

Thomas Hellum: As a public service broadcaster, NRK doesn't need to sell or profit from its productions, or even have them noticed outside Norway. It is of course fun to be noticed abroad and part of the story of *Minutt for minutt* in the public discourse in Norway is its impact abroad. But that's been limited in terms of actual sales. We have a company in London which sells ready-mades and formats for NRK, and some of the Slow TV

productions are in its catalogue. One US television station considered buying one of the programmes, but its policy was not to screen anything containing technical errors that lasted longer than four seconds, and of course that is difficult to guarantee in first-time projects.

Aniki: Errors are part of the experience for the viewer of *Minutt for minutt*, part of the drama, the waiting, part of the story.

Thomas Hellum: The concept has been adapted in different places. In Finland, the national broadcaster YLE did a “sauna night” programme, so that topic is very clearly rooted in the national culture. On a more practical level, Slow TV has been used in cancer treatment in Austria. BBC4 in the UK experimented with a broadcast from a cross-channel ferry and one from a local city bus. These were inspired by the *Minutt for minutt* concept, but there was no host, no voiceover, no music, no explanation of anything going on. I see this as more “slow” in a way, more arty. What we do is not art, it is definitely storytelling.

Aniki: This leads us to my last question, which is about the parallels between Slow Cinema and other kinds of slow culture that have grown up in more or less the same time-frame as *Minutt for minutt*. Is that coincidental, or have you and your colleagues been influenced by filmmakers or other aspects of slow culture? Why do you think these phenomena have emerged around the world over the last decade or so?

Thomas Hellum: I’m really not into the artistic side of all this. I find Slow Cinema too slow. Such filmmakers make the story more mysterious than necessary. I’ve never seen Warhol’s *Empire* film, for example, and I have no wish to. I come from a public service television tradition that aims to tell a story so that people can understand it and enjoy it. Our educational mission is deeply rooted at NRK. We want to make programmes that are clear and direct, and also fun. On the other hand, of course nothing emerges in a vacuum. *Minutt for minutt* is not consciously part of the broader slow movement, but it can be used and consumed that way. It is part of a cultural moment, a trend. A more useful parallel for me is the shift in journalism and online media towards very short and very long writing. We don’t want 500-word articles any more; we read very short blurbs, or long reads. That’s interesting to me, and I think that *Minutt for minutt* is more part of that tendency - a desire to tell and to read and to view longer stories.

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