

# SURRENDER YOUR HORNS

*Real and fantasy worlds intertwine in a tragic story where rhinos die because myths live.*



## **SYNOPSIS**

After snorting a line of powdered horn, a lonely Irishman undergoes a Kafkaesque metamorphosis that turns him into a man with a rhino's head. Embodying both *hunter* and *hunted*, he guides us into an eclectic series of real and fantasy worlds, from the medieval hunt of the unicorn to the recent death of the world's last male northern white rhino. Documentary scenes in Kenya, Vietnam, and across Europe merge with Theatre of the Absurd-style stage performances of unicorn nightclubbers, horn smugglers, and reproductive biologists to explore the fragile entanglement of all species versus the enduring power of the human imagination. As rhinos surrender their horns to live, and others die for them, we uncover how this creature is being hunted both in life and in death.

### *What inspired you to begin this project?*

In 2015, I came across an article in The Guardian about Sudan, the world's last male northern white rhino. Surrounded by armed guards inside Kenya's Ol Pejeta Conservancy, the headline read, "A picture of loneliness," and the caption below, "Sudan doesn't know how precious he is." What struck me most was the author's human-centered perspective not only on the rhino poaching crisis, but also on Sudan's emotional state. After I looked closer at this crisis, its roots and manifestations, I noted how many news outlets and films focused on the poachers in Africa and the end users in Asia. The deeper I delved into the overlooked forces at play — including ancient mythology, European colonialism, man's timeless obsession with power — the more I questioned the headline: was Sudan lonely long before he ever stood on the brink of extinction, since the beginning of his captivity as a calf shipped from the wilds of Africa to a European zoo, or is he even lonely at all, merely serving as a backdrop for the writer's own emotional projections?

These questions and conflicts, among others, made me (re-) consider how relative our position is to how we perceive the world and relate to the stories unfolding around us. Soon after reading the article I wrote to the Northern white rhino committee to inquire about a research visit.

### *Why did you want to make this film?*

I use film and photography, along with other forms, to approach different subjects and themes that I find challenging to understand, but wish to understand better. The making of this film offered me the opportunity to explore the various complex perspectives surrounding the rhino horn trade, while carefully illuminating our entanglement and dependence on one another – both human and more than human – rather than simply pointing the finger at the usual causes or culprits.

### *The film has clearly involved a lot of research. Perhaps you can expand on the process of bringing it together?*

For four years I researched and followed the multi-layered stories that surrounded the rhino horn trade. This research evolved independently and intuitively, whereby one story, place or person would lead me on to the next. During the early stages of research, I began filming, and some of this footage is included in the film. I met with wildlife organisations, conservationists, scientists, animal rights lawyers, activists, prosecutors, poachers, museum directors and rhino whisperers.

I was interested in gathering and listening to the many perspectives that unfolded around the subject. Some of the organisations allowed me access to their video archives, which I included in the film, thus commenting on the varied points of view and the technological apparatuses that are used to observe and 'look' at animals. For example, a group of vultures observe a mother and baby rhino for over five minutes, filmed by conversationalists close by. In the background, the camera's shutter release is heard capturing hundreds of images. I saw this footage as a kind of omen, or allegory; perhaps the vultures (and conservationists) are sensing near death for the species, but I was also intrigued how the conservationists looked at and documented these animals.

I had accumulated a considerable amount of documentary research and footage, and to help make sense of the ambiguities that confronted me throughout this research, and its multi-layered dimension, I began to write a script that allowed me to merge the varied stories and perspectives together. Simultaneously the surrounding stories grew increasingly absurd and strange, so it felt like a natural progression to bring in elements of performance, staging and re-enactment.

### *Can you expand a little on your approach of merging theatre, script and documentary?*

Whilst working within the documentary genre, I found myself questioning its form: I often feel that the moment the filmmaker decides to place a camera within a scene, or in front of their subject, 'reality' is altered. In this instance, therefore, I decided to expand on 'reality', in ways that I had not done before. Also, I find the notion of truth can often be contested, versions of the truth can shift from one side of the border to the next, depending on what side you are positioned. I often think that the 'truest' form of capturing 'reality' is a hole in the wall style, or when the filmmaker is so deeply embedded within a community that the camera becomes an extension of the body, like an arm.

I was inspired by post-revolution Iranian cinema—how documentary and fiction merged so creatively. The point wasn't to figure out what's "real" and what not, but to marvel at how cinema renders everything at once both fictional and true. There wasn't an obsession to label or classify what genre it was, it was seen as just cinema.

In one scene in *Surrender Your Horns*, Nigel Monaghan, Director of Dublin's Natural History Museum describes a theft of rhino horns from the museum. He goes on to explain how museums have had to use replica horns both to deter thieves and as a means of educating their audience on the crisis, by stating that the horns are fake for a reason. During the interview, some of the trophy heads begin to move. Some of my viewers have thought the heads are electric, installed by the museum, others that both the interview with Nigel and the heads were staged. I consider natural history museums, and the way that animals are staged and represented within them, as monuments to our difficult relationships with animals - and ourselves. The interventions I make to such footage is intended to disrupt or question these places and constructs.

In addition, introducing script allowed me to 'open up' the project, allowing voices that often go unheard to be included. For example, a group of Irish travellers was supposedly involved in the theft of rhino horns from museums across Europe. A story that began for me in Kenya unexpectedly took me back to Ireland – my home country. Irish travellers and their associated stories are often misrepresented on screen, and I found myself confronted with the challenge of how their story should be included. In the process, I reached out to John Connors, an actor and writer from the traveller community and began a conversation. He later contributed to part of the script. Thus the script allowed agency on how their story was to be represented.

The script also allowed me to pose questions that I found difficult to answer within the documentary form. For example, whilst in the research stage a recurring question for me was: if the rhinos could communicate with us, or us with them, would they wish for the continuation of their species via artificial intervention? The scientists that I reached out to were not forthcoming in their responses, so I constructed a fictional scene based on interviews and articles related to this question.

### *And can you tell us a little more about the use of the theatre?*

Both the physical and symbolic use of the theatre stage allowed me to re-enact parts of the documentary research and footage that I collected. Some scenes in a theatre became a visual representation of the merging of documentary and fiction combined in one frame, whereby documentary footage was projected onto the theatre screen and re-enactments played out on stage in the foreground. This layering technique spoke to the entangled layers of stories and histories, and how the past has consequences on the contemporary.

*Can you tell us about some of the mythological, historical and cultural references we encounter in the work?*

I compare the image of Sudan to the protagonist who stands alone in the final scene of *Rhinocéros*, the post-WWII play by Eugène Ionesco. In that play, one defiant man watches his family, friends, and neighbours morph into rhinos amid a bizarre epidemic of “rhinocerotitis.” The play was an apparent allegory for the rise of fascism: Ionesco illustrates a “sick world,” where resisting the continuous calls of conformity breeds isolation, even loneliness. For me, the Theatre-of-the-Absurd style of *Rhinocéros* has relevance in our contemporary world, as it speaks to the futility and absurdity of the human condition as much as to our longstanding capacity for cruelty. I contemplated whether humanity is perhaps doomed to face the Absurd.

The labyrinth of research on humanity’s enduring obsession with horns also guided me to the famed *Hunt of the Unicorn*, which features in the film. A series of medieval tapestries depict a group of European noblemen hunting the mythical creature and eventually severing its magical horn. Like the unicorn, Sudan found himself behind fences, while both creatures are targeted for their horns. Sudan’s life of captivity is in part a picture of his loneliness and ours. His tragedy reveals the sometimes devastating power of the human imagination, our obsessions and myths.

*And finally, the ending of the film. The scene continues for some 7 minutes: can you tell us a little about this?*

Yes, it’s one of my favourite parts, the varying perspectives come together here, when cast members with either aligned or opposing views gather around a dinner table, symbolizing our entanglement not only with other species, but also within our own. As the camera zooms out from the table, the guests are consumed by their conversations and circumstances, and no conclusion is reached — the party and story continue. In the final moments of the film, sound technicians and set monitors are revealed slowly within the frame, signalling my attempt to recentre the viewer, and to question our own position within this story and script — which could be interpreted as the absurdity of life. If the world is a stage, I wonder, is this how we will continue to perform?

## **DIRECTOR AND PRODUCER BIOS**

**Bryony Dunne** is an Irish visual artist and filmmaker who engages with the overlap between documentary film, cinema, photography, and the natural world. She develops research-driven projects to explore the power dynamics between humanity and nature and fantasies of human control, oftentimes using fact-based fictions and hypothetical futures to build these interconnected narratives. Her work has been exhibited at the Mosaic Rooms (London), Gypsum and Townhouse galleries (Cairo), the Irish Film Institute (Dublin), DEPO (Istanbul), among other venues, and she has participated in a number of international film and video festivals, including the Thessaloniki Documentary Film Festival (Greece), Cork International Film Festival (Ireland), and Rencontres Internationales Paris/Berlin. In 2021/22 she was resident at the Jan van Eyck Academie in Maastricht and is currently undertaking a research fellowship for a new film with Onassis Air in Athens.

**Nuala Carr** has been producing film and television for over two decades. She was a director of Paradox Pictures, producing dramas and documentaries, from Goran Paskalijevic’s feature film *How Harry Became a Tree*, and Declan Reck’s award-winning short *Quando*, to the documentaries *Guns and Chiffon*, *The Burning of Cork*, and *Estella*. She also produced the two-part RTE documentary series *Burnt by the Sun*, directed by Garry Keane (Gaza), and has served as a series producer with COCO TV Ireland and Blink Films UK. Her format idea *Holiday is it Anyway?* Won Best European TV Format at the Eurovision Creative forum in Berlin.

**Luke Mc Manus** is an Irish director and producer based in Dublin. He has directed numerous award-winning documentary and drama projects for NBC, Netflix, RTÉ, Al Jazeera, Channel 4, winning four IFTAs in the process. Directing credits include *North Circular*, *Jump Girls*, *I Am Immigrant*, *Crainn na hEireann*, *Making a Museum*, *Dermot Bannon & The Big Build* and *Féile Dreams*. His debut feature doc as producer was *The Lonely Battle of Thomas Reid*, a psychological study of a farmer battling the Irish State premiered in the Main Competition at IDFA in 2018, won the George Morrison Award for Best Feature Documentary at the Irish Film & Television Awards and the Best Irish Film Award at the Dublin International Film Festival.

#### PRINCIPAL CREW

Director/ Writer	<a href="#">Bryony Dunne</a>
Producers	Bryony Dunne <a href="#">Nuala Carr</a> (Fourth Wall Film and TV), <a href="#">Luke McManus</a> (Madhouse Films)
Co-writer	<a href="#">Elle Kurancid</a>
Cinematographer	<a href="#">Eleanor Bowman</a>
Editor	<a href="#">Giorgos Zaferis</a>
Colourist	<a href="#">Dimitris Karteris</a>
Sound design, music and mix	<a href="#">Alyssa Moxley</a>
Motion Graphic Artist	Gregory Blunt
Illustration	Peter Blodau

#### TECHNICAL INFO

Year of production	2022
Duration	62 mins
Country of origin	Ireland
Genre	Docufiction
Screening format	DCP / BluRay / ProRes
Ratio	2.35:1
Sound Format	5:1 / Stereo
Languages	English / Portuguese / Swahili / Vietnamese
Subtitles	English / Portuguese / French / Spanish

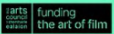
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DIRECTED BY BRYONY DUNNE  
PRODUCED BY BRYONY DUNNE, NUALA CARR, LUKE MCMANUS  
SCREENPLAY ELLE KURANCID & BRYONY DUNNE DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY ELEANOR BOWMAN  
EDITED BY GEORGE ZAFIRIS MUSIC BY ALYSSA MOXLEY



Vidéographe















