

Into the Arctic wilderness: exploring New Land

By Martie Bester

Miki Redelinghuys, director and producer at Plexus Films in Cape Town, and filmmaker Kyle O'Donoghue collaborated on their latest documentary *New Land*, which portrays a 72-day ski expedition on Ellesmere Island in northern Canada. The South African / Norwegian co-production, a physically gruelling experience, was entirely filmed by O'Donoghue in *New Land*, one of the last remaining true wilderness areas on the planet.



FREEZE FRAME: Kyle O'Donoghue with Tobias Thorleifsson

Pushing boundaries

Miki Redelinghuys says the men's main guide and point of reference was Svedrup's diary. "They used his maps and diary as a guide, calling it their 111-year-old *Lonely Planet* guide. The film is geographically located in an area called New Land, but philosophically it also deals with our need to explore 'new land', to push our boundaries, leave our comfort zone..."

Continues Redelinghuys: "I have to add that it takes a special kind of filmmaker to be able to tell this story. Kyle has a unique set of skills in that he could do the expedition and film it; but he is also an experienced social documentary storyteller, so he tells the expedition story from a refreshing point of view."

She remarks that in this world where almost everything is accessible via internet; where every kind of travel has already been plotted by someone else on Trip Advisor; she loved the idea of telling the story of four men heading into the wilderness.

"Apart from the men, there was another critical member of the ice crew: Axel. The Canadian Inuit dog was Kyle's constant companion, gear-puller and tripod watcher, and was also responsible for regular tumbles into snow with gear as he pulled

Axel catching up on some sleep



the filming Kyle over the landscape with his immense strength," says Redelinghuys.

Extraordinary journey

According to her, *New Land* is a story about following a crazy dream, but also about following it with commitment, focus and a whole lot of training and preparation. "Toby, John, Hugh and Kyle are ordinary guys with families, who undertake an extraordinary journey, with extraordinary risks.

"They are rewarded by experiencing an arctic wilderness that few of us will ever see; they encounter arctic wolves, polar bears, arctic foxes, the otherworldly musk ox – animals most of us have only ever read about or seen on television.

"They form a special bond with their four dogs, who the audience gets to know and love during the course of the story – I think there is plenty of emotional engagement."

Specialised filming

O'Donoghue comments that he used 'run-and-gun' style of filming on Panasonic GH3 cameras with a few different lenses, but there are also blue chip landscapes,

wildlife moments and stunning time lapses.

"Additionally we used a lot of POV cameras attached to sleds, skis, etc. in driving winds and in -40° centigrade.

"Batteries died quickly. We would get about five minutes per GoPro battery. We took flexible solar panels to charge batteries. Since we had 24 hours sunlight for 50 days of the trip we could charge overnight," explains O'Donoghue.

Backup and card storage was also a challenge since power from the solar panels was limited. To overcome this O'Donoghue bought 50 32 gig SD cards which he treated as tapes. He would ski with shot cards in a waterproof pouch on his body in case of falling through the sea ice, or losing a sled through the ice.

"Filming in snow is tricky for exposure especially if you are forced to shoot in auto a lot of the time. To overcome this I used the exposure compensation and over exposed by two stops for most of the time," he adds.

Behind the scenes

New Land was in pre-production for 18 months' training, writing story outlines and trying to get a broadcaster on board. Filming took place in Norway, Canada, America, South Africa and the Canadian Arctic.

The production took three months to film and post-production will take three months for the initial Norwegian version and a further two months for the English version.

Editing is being done by Redelinghuys, O'Donoghue and Charlene Waite working on both timelines as the film will be broadcast as two 46-minute documentaries.

TV 2 Norway is the team's Norwegian broadcast and distribution partner. The team is looking for other distributors.

New Land is Redelinghuys and O'Donoghue's sixth collaboration. SA

"I moved to Norway two years ago and reconnected with Tobias Thorleifsson, a friend I had worked with in Antarctica five years before. He was the historical consultant who made sure we got all our facts right about Otto Sverdrup who was the Norwegian explorer in whose footsteps we followed, celebrating his largely unknown achievements," says Kyle O'Donoghue.

The documentary filmmaker undertook the journey with Thorleifsson, John Huston from the US, Hugh Dale-Harris from Canada and four Canadian Inuit dogs – Axel, Ellie, Napu and Larry.

O'Donoghue continues: "The expedition centres on our search for a lost cairn (pile of rocks) which Sverdrup built at his northernmost point and which has never been found. That is the narrative thrust which kept us moving forward.

"Then of course there were the daily trials and tribulations, weather threats, and wolves and polar bears circling our camp..."