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Transition: Gentle, trilling music with a steady drumbeat plays under the dialogue.

Promo: *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.

Music: “Huddle Formation” from the album *Thunder, Lightning, Strike* by The Go! Team—a fast, upbeat, peppy song. Music plays as Jesse speaks, then fades out.

Jesse Thorn: It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest, Victor Kossakovsky, is a filmmaker. And these days he's been thinking a lot about rocks. Big, granite boulders; crushed up gravel; stunning slabs of marble. In fact, he hasn't just been thinking about rocks. He also has been developing opinions about rocks. In fact, opinions might not even be the right word. Deeply held convictions that rocks are in a sense alive, that buildings made of rocks should be beautiful—if nothing else, to sort of honor the rock's sacrifice. And that concrete—crushed up rocks—is more or less a blight on the world.

He formed these convictions over the last few years while he was making his new film, *Architecton*. *Architecton* is a documentary about stone. It's about how humans manipulate ancient elements to create the homes in which we live, the buildings in which we work, and the streets on which we walk. And if I say that it is a documentary about stone and buildings, maybe the movie that pops into your head is like a famous geologist narrating something while he walks down a street and points meaningfully at things. And maybe there's an interview with a guy who knows everything about diamonds, which are fancy rocks. But *Architecton* is not that kind of movie. In *Architecton* the subject is the star. And the subject is—again—rocks!

Kossakovsky's film meditates on mountains, on buildings, on mines. He travels to a cement factory to film a boulder being crushed at 1,000 frames per second. Most of the film is completely silent. One of Kossakovsky's other deeply held convictions is that there is no point in making a film unless you are going to really look at things. It is kind of a breathtaking movie, like nothing you've ever seen. And I'm so thrilled to welcome Victor onto the show. Let's get into it.

Transition: Bright, chiming synth.

Jesse Thorn: Victor, welcome to *Bullseye*. I'm so happy to have you on the show, and thank you for this beautiful movie.

Victor Kossakovsky: Thank you for your interest, guys. Thank you.

Jesse Thorn: When was the first time you pointed your camera at a rock?

Victor Kossakovsky: Hm. You know, everyone filming people mostly, right? And I thought, oh, we understood people, right? We are a nice, tender, creative creature. At the same time, we are killers. Awful, aggressive, self-centric. And I thought maybe I shouldn't do films

about humans anymore. Then I start to film animals. And then I realize, “Oh. It's also not difficult, because they're amazing and smart.” And they even make jokes, actually.

(They chuckle.)

I made a movie about pigs, and they even make jokes. And then I said, “How can I challenge myself?” And I said, “Why don't I film something which doesn't move? Something which doesn't?” So, I said, “What if I try to film a stone or a rock and try to make my viewers feel empathy towards rock?” That's a good challenge, no? And actually, I even experienced this. So, I was filming in cement factory, and the boss of cement factory who runs it 25 years already almost, he's actually the owner of cement factory. He was standing close to me when I was filming crush machine, when they take rocks from the mountain, and they bring it to the crash machine, and they squeeze it (*claps hands together*) with heavy pressure.

And that's the last second of the life of the rock. I film 1,000 frame per second. And the owner of the factory—cement factory—start to cry. He said, “I never seen anything like it. I'm doing this for more than 20 years, and I never pay attention that we are crushing rocks.” But he never any empathy towards stone.

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And then, a few weeks after, I came home to start a movie. He sent me a message. He said, “Victor, you changed my life. I quit this job. I sold the factory. I will do something else.”

(They chuckle.)

It's unbelievable, right? So, it works.

Jesse Thorn: Did you feel empathy for rocks before you pointed a camera at them?

Victor Kossakovsky: Hm. That's a good one. I just was thinking; I live in St. Petersburg, right? I was born in St. Petersburg. And in St. Petersburg—in the center of St. Petersburg—there is a main square. And we have a—hmm, Hermitage. I don't know if you know Hermitage, right? So, in front of Hermitage we have a pillar. It's like—it's called Александровская колонна. And it's a 600-ton pillar. And actually, we don't know how it was made. The old knowledge we have is quite flimsy. You cannot trust it, because they say it's made by Montferrand. And they said there are some drawings, but the drawings contradict each other. And actually, there are many gaps in the process.

And you actually— If you ask engineers today to make something similar, and they probably cannot do it. So, today with all our technique, equipment, lift machine, cranes, and we cannot do 600-ton solid column with such perfection that the diameter of the bottom is same as the top. So, it was quite a mystery how they made it. So, I start to think maybe we don't know something about it. For hundreds and hundred years, cities were built in one simple idea: in the center, religious cathedral or mosque or whatever. And then streets are coming into it. This was probably Sagrada Familia—which is around corner—is the last cathedral we, as

human, are building. Because modern cities cannot have a religious building anymore, because we live in multicultural society. Right?

So, it means we have to find something new which will be real доминанта of the city—which will be a really important building of the city. And I asked him—100 most important people in architecture today—“What do you think we have to build in order it will be emotionally important for us today and in the few next 100 years?”

And you know what? No one knew answer. No one. They came with simple, banal answers like school, university, museum, concert hall, football stadium, fitness center, love hotel. It was not any vision of future. No one. And only one said to me, “Let's not touch it. Let's not even go there as a park. Let's keep it as a—let's give it to nature. Let's give it, that we remember that we are not alone in this planet; that we are not only one creature in the planet; that nature its own rights to be here.” So. And it's good that it's in the center of the cities—that we, every time go, we see it as something that reminds us that nature is important. So, this is how it happened.

Jesse Thorn: Was that Michele De Lucchi, the architect in the film?

Victor Kossakovsky: Yeah. Of course, there are architects. I spend a lot of time with very famous architects. And very interestingly, only one said to me, “I'm ashamed of what I'm doing.” It's very interesting, because most of them told me almost same story. A little bit different in small nuances, but generally the same story. It's like this. So, I live in the city—or in a town, or in a—and on the street was nine/ten buildings. One of them was beautiful, and nine of them were ugly.

And I asked myself, “Huh. Strange. We know how to make beautiful one. Best one.”

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“Why we are spending money and time to build ugly one if we know how to build beautiful?”

So, I decided to become an architect. So, I studied six/seven years, longer than any other profession. Then I was 20 years poor, because no one wanted to build my buildings. I asked the architect, “Can I see your catalog or body of your work? Like, just to see what you guys do in your office.” And then I realize unbelievable thing. So, normally catalogs has 100 pages. 10 of the projects in the beginning—and the cover like a poster. Like, wow, beautiful. Everyone love them, and we know them. But 90 projects, horrible rectangle from concrete.

And I said, “Hey, wait a second! You become architect because you wanted to build something beautiful.”

And Michele De Lucci said, “Yes, I feel shame what we are doing.”

And the second reason I chose him? Because he look like a prophet. You know?

(Jesse chuckles.)

If you look, he really look like—(chuckles). And you kind of want to listen to him. That's the—I even (unclear), because normally I don't make interviews. (Chuckles.) But I knew if I will not talk to him, people will never forgive me. (Laughs.) In front of you, this person look like prophet, and then you never ask him anything. So, I said, “Okay, I will do interview.”

Jesse Thorn: We have so much more to get into with Victor Kossakovsky. He's the director of the documentary *Architecton*. Stay with us. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

Transition: Thumpy synth with a syncopated beat.

Jesse Thorn: It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn, I'm talking with filmmaker Victor Kossakovsky. His new documentary, *Architecton*, is a study of rocks, earth, and buildings.

I think one of the principles of your films, as a filmmaker, is that you want to look at things—which isn't always the organizing principle. It's always important in film, but it's not always the sole organizing principle, right? Like, you want to see things; you want something interesting to look at, and to learn from the looking rather than from talking.

Victor Kossakovsky: Listen. Imagine you come to cinema theater, and someone starts to talk to you from the screen. Then your rational part of the brain—even this concept of rational/irrational is already questioned by scientists. But anyway. We have this part of the brain which is responsible for understanding information, for listening. So, if I start a movie, and I start to—if someone on my screen start to talk to you, you want to understand what I'm trying to tell you. But if I don't say anything to you, if I just show you picture, then what will happen? Then another part of your brain, which is responsible for you watching, analyzing yourself, thinking yourself, and feeling yourself will be indicated. And you start to feel what you see from the screen.

The difference is huge. Then I allow you to be co-writer in my film. Because in a way, I go against rules of cinema today. Because if you go to most popular films today which have biggest spokes office, the average length of the shot? 2.2 second. So, every two seconds, director makes cut. When he makes cut every two second, he—in a way—dictate to you what to think, because you have no chance to think yourself. He tells you what to think. If I give you a shot five minutes, you have chance to see. In my film, sometimes you can see shots 10 minutes and no single word. like *Gunde*, for example. The final of *Gunde* is ten minutes, no single word. And you have chance to see yourself. You have chance to answer yourself. What do you see, and what do you feel? Look, if you see architecture or if you go to museum, you don't like someone talking to you about this picture or painting, right?

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You have your eyes yourself. After all, we are animals, right? You know that you and me, we are animals, and we need only four seconds to understand who is in front of us. Only four seconds. And same as animal, if you are in savanna—if you are antelope in savanna, you

need just one look understand is it predator? Or is it my food? Or is it I am food of this? Or is it my friend, and I shouldn't run? Or I have to run immediately?

So, in one look, you read everything. Right? And you need four seconds to understand who is in front of you. And most of the time you are right.

Jesse Thorn: I live in a house—it's 20 feet from where I'm sitting right now—that is, by Los Angeles standards, ancient. My house is 130 years old. Which probably makes it, you know, one of the 500 oldest houses in Los Angeles. Maybe there are some, you know, early 19th century Spanish colonial dwellings that remain. But otherwise, a Victorian is about as old as it gets.

My house is, in my opinion, very beautiful. That's why I bought it. But it's made of wood and probably 100 or 200 years from now, even though it's survived this long, it'll just be gone. Certainly 1,000 or 2,000 years from now, it will be gone. Because it's made of wood. It will be like Scandinavia, where there's no old buildings, because they built all their houses out of wood and the wood disappears eventually.

Do you think that the kind of semi-permanence that is represented by a stone or building out of stone is essential to beauty?

Victor Kossakovsky: I believe it's a question of responsibility. If you—after all, if you cut the tree—if you cut the tree, right?—if you cut the tree, and then— You cannot just throw it away, right? It's something like you'll feel bad, right? It means you'll say, “Okay, I cut the tree, beautiful tree, which stays here 100 years. I have to be responsible.” And you will think about each piece of it. Have to use it properly, right? If you take—if you came to mountain... In the moment we talk to you now, in the moment we speak, a few hundred mountains disappear in China right now. China produce cement in one year more than United States of America in all 20th century combined. In one year, China produced most cement than 100 years of the previous century of United States of America.

What I'm saying is, if you take rock—let's say 1,000-ton rock or 100-ton rock—you'll be responsible for it, right? You'll say, “Okay, we demolish mountain. But we have to this rock for good reason.” Right? You'll think, “What aesthetic do I have to put to this concrete? What kind of shape supposed to be in my building?” Because you'll know that this is forever. If you build from rock, you know it's forever. Then if you build something ugly, then it is forever people will say, “Ah, it was architect Kossakovsky Victor. He was such an ugly, stupid man. Look what crap he built from the rock!”

So, that's why you will be responsible. And you will say, “No, I have to think more. I have to make a space forever. I have to be clever and have to make it in a way that people will love me and just not destroy this building. And will keep it forever.” Then responsibility. But if you build for 40 years, it doesn't matter!

Jesse Thorn: What kind of house do you live in?

Victor Kossakovsky: I live in the—I was lucky all my life. In St. Petersburg, I even—in a building—and close to me, there is a building where Pushkin used to live and (*unclear*) used to live. It's just such privilege to be born in such place. And then at the moment, I live in very beautiful—In Barcelona, very particular architecture.

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I live in a really classic Barcelona architecture building. So. And you see, if you build properly, all planet wants to come to Barcelona, right? All planet wants to come to Florence; all planet wants to come to Venice. Why does it go? What the hell? Why does it go? It's hot. It's 35 degrees. You are switching an airplane. It's a line—everywhere it's lines, and everywhere tons of people with suitcases. Why you go there? You want to see beauty. Right? That's what it is. That's what I'm saying.

If we will build properly, then it'll be pleasure for our grandson to remember us. And they will have to clean it and keep it forever, right? This building. But if you build what we build, rectangle, then they will have just to demolish it. This is the difference. So, I believe we live in the time of boringness, a pandemic of boring architecture. I call to architects to stop to remember why they became an architect. Why they became the architect? They became architect in order to build something beautiful. Keep this dream alive!

Jesse Thorn: I was in Mexico City a couple years ago, and I went to a house that was designed by Luis Barragán, the great Mexican architect. This was a cement house. And it was one of the most beautiful places I've ever been in my life. The cement itself is not necessarily the most beautiful material.

Victor Kossakovsky: And not necessarily guilty. (*Chuckles.*)

Jesse Thorn: But using the cement allowed him to manipulate color and light and... create a sort of narrative of the experience of the house.

Victor Kossakovsky: I agree with you. Not necessarily bad. The question is: cement allow us to make plastic material. Concrete is very plastic material. If it's very plastic, my question is why we are making rectangles? It's plastic! Why don't we make really beautiful thing?! So, it means it's not question of architect. It's a question of society itself. It's a question of construction business, developer business, political involved. And so, this is not architects who are guilty, because they know how to build beautiful. And cement actually allow us to make beautiful buildings. You know? Because it's called humanism. Everything for humanism.

So, I believe we came to the point when humanism, we can probably make next step. Humanism, in a certain level, was very good for us. But today I would say we transformed it to something not really good, because we put ourself to the center of universe. And everything—everything!—just for us. We can kill 1,000,000,000 pigs. It's for humanism, right? It's humanism. We need to eat. We kill 2,000,000,000,000 fish every year. Two trillion! It's called humanism. We cut forest in order to put corn for that 1,000,000,000 pigs and half-billion cow. And then because we do this, if we cut forests, we're actually cutting rain. Because forests create rain.

So, imagine in the planet we have 1,000,000,000 people without water. In the very same time, we have 1,000,000,000 pigs, half-billion cows, and other animals which needs (*unclear*) and ten times more water than human. Excuse me. What we are doing? What we are doing?! And order to feed them, we cut forest, and it make it more dry! So, what we are doing?

It's called humanism. I believe, we as a species, we have to come to the moment. We say human is—we're okay, but we are ready to make next step. Without empathy, our future not possible. If we not put empathy to our existence, we'll not survive here. We must say, “We are not here alone.”

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We must respect others. We must respect forest. We must respect animals. We cannot kill everyone. We cannot. Otherwise, we'll not survive. We cannot make cement in such volume. Imagine we produce cement enough to build 1,000-meter-tall wall, one meter thick, around equator in one year. In one year, we produce such amount of cement. This is what we do. It cannot be. It cannot be possible.

Jesse Thorn: We're gonna take a break. When we come back, we will wrap up with the filmmaker Victor Kossakovsky. He's the director of the new documentary *Architecton*. It's *Bullseye* for MaximumFun.org and NPR.

Promo:

Jordan Morris: It's hard to explain what happens on *Jordan, Jesse, Go!*.

Jesse Thorn: So, I had my kids do it.

Kid 1: Saying swear words.

Jesse: Saying swear words?

Kid 2: Yeah, um...

Kid 1: Bad jokes.

Jesse: Bad jokes?

Kid 2: Bad jokes. Maybe it's like you tell people that you're gonna interview them, and then you just stay there like really quiet and try and creep them out.

Kid 1: (*Giggles.*) It's just really boring.

Jesse: Because of Jordan, right? Not me?

Kid 1: Because of both of you.

Jesse: (*Both amused and disappointed.*) Oh.

Jordan: Subscribe to *Jordan, Jesse, Go!*.

Jesse: A comedy show for grownups.

Transition: Thumpy synth with a syncopated beat.

Jesse Thorn: Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. I'm talking with Victor Kossakovsky. He's an acclaimed documentarian whose past works include *Gunda* and *Aquarela*. His newest movie, *Architecton*, is a study of stone and rocks. It's breathtaking. You can catch it now in select theaters. And that is the way to catch it. See it on a big screen if you can. Let's get back into our conversation.

The other day, I watched a documentary about Steven Spielberg. And there are some Steven Spielberg movies that I really love. I love *E.T.*; *Jaws* is really great. *Close Encounters* is really great. I like those *Indiana Jones* movies.

And when I was watching this documentary— I don't drink, but if I did drink, I would've created a drinking game of the number of times people say the word “storytelling” or “storyteller”. It got ridiculous. I was like, “I get it. Storytelling.”

Do you think that storytelling—or for that matter, making an argument—are essential to filmmaking?

Victor Kossakovsky: Not at all. Film was born not as storytelling. Film was— Story might be important, not necessary. Film was born as a shot, a single shot—which might have story inside the shot. Film as a piece of art—part of art—was born as a unique shot. That unique shot combined with another unique shot might create story, but not necessary. Unique shot create unusual— It create feelings you never felt before. Unique shot allow you to see something you never seen before. It allow you to think something you never think before. This is what filmmaking is about.

Then you can put it in a few different order. I can tell you even more. I can make and you can make and anyone who is working now on our program, we can make a few—let's say 10 shots from our windows, maybe if you're looking from the same window. And then each of us will put them in different order. We will have different stories. Because each of us has a different perception you have to see. But it's not necessarily element for the cinema. No. Cinema is not about story. It could contain story. But still, I do respect Spielberg as any other.

I'm not saying my opinion is correct. I'm not saying everyone must—supposed to follow my opinion.

I just see that, in your country, such a huge gap between documentary and fiction. The best cinematographers of the planet, of course, working in fiction. The best talented people, of course, working in animation. But in documentary picture, it's normally very poor. Because story is dominating.

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People are taking interviews. “Oh, Spielberg did great. He makes storytelling, da-da-dadada.” It's not art. It's not art. You became filmmaker not to make interviews. It's another way of thinking. You need different education; you need different dreams; you need different purpose of life if you're taking interview and if you're thinking about cinema as it is—as poor cinemas—it is boring. You have different idea of life, you have different dreams, you have different purpose to wake up, and you have different purpose in your day. You have different ideas you have to spend your time. No, you would rather to see; look from window instead of taking interviews.

Jesse Thorn: How literal is the sound in *Architecton*?

Victor Kossakovsky: In *Architecton*, I'm working with an amazing, amazing, amazing sound man. I made many movies with him. And I remember article in one American magazine. They say, “Oh, we thought Atmos sound in film (*unclear*) *Roma* is amazing. But when we saw *Aquarela*, we understood that sound could be something even better.”

So, this is guy, Aleksandr Dudarev. I know him since 1986. In my first routine day as director, it was his first routine day as sound recordist. And he's amazing.

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Clip: (*The sound of waves crashing on the beach.*)

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Victor Kossakovsky: Imagine we come into the sound recording with 100 tracks. We come into the mix with 100 tracks for documentary. Imagine this. And then we do Atmos sound (*chuckles*) mix. In normal documentary, if you ask about Spielberg, and it's amazing storyteller, you don't need 100 tracks. So—

Jesse Thorn: You have mono sound, probably. (*Chuckles.*)

Victor Kossakovsky: Exactly! So, my sound records, records sound, edits sound. And from these small pieces, he makes symphony. And then we mix it in Atmosstudio. So, it's absolutely a privilege to work with such absolutely genius Aleksandr Dudarev, yeah. I believe he's the best in documentary. Yeah. If you have seen our previous movie, like *Aquarela* or *Gunda*, then you know he's really a master. In every film! It's like masterpiece.

Now we just finish another movie, called *Trillion*—which produced actually from—Joaquin Phoenix as producer. So, we made another movie, *Trillion*. It's 80 minutes. No single word. No single word. Just sound of my beautiful sound man.

Jesse Thorn: Victor, thank you so much for talking to me on *Bullseye*, and thank you for your beautiful film.

Victor Kossakovsky: Thank you very much. Good luck to you people.

Jesse Thorn: Victor Kossakovsky. *Architecton* is playing in select theaters. If it's coming to your town, take the opportunity to watch it on the big screen, because it is really something to look at. His earlier movie, *Aquarela*—which is about water and climate change—is available for rent or purchase basically everywhere.

Transition: Playful synth with a syncopated beat.

Jesse Thorn: That's the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. *Bullseye*, created from the homes of me and the staff of Maximum Fun, as well as at Maximum Fun HQ—overlooking beautiful MacArthur Park in Los Angeles, California. I saw a great piece in *LA Public Press* about the summer concert series in MacArthur Park. The other day in MacArthur Park there was a sort of occupation by the Marines, National Guard, and ICE. And the other night in MacArthur Park, in the bandshell, there was a huge pro-immigrant cumbia and ska/punk rock concert. And watching the footage from that, I was bummed that I missed it. It looked like a blast.

Our show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer is Kevin Ferguson. Our producers are Jesus Ambrosio and Richard Robey. Our production fellow, Hannah Moroz. Our video producer, Daniel Speer. Special thanks this week to Oksana and the team at Studio Red in Barcelona, Spain for recording our conversation with Victor Kossakovsky. We get booking help on *Bullseye* from Mara Davis.

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Our interstitial music comes from our friend Dan Wally, aka DJW. You can find his music at DJWsounds.bandcamp.com. A lot of it is pay-what-you-want. So, go grab some *Bullseye* beats for your lo-fi hip-hop to study to, or whatever it is that people like. Our theme music was written and recorded by The Go! Team. Great band! It's called “Huddle Formation”. Thanks to The Go! Team. Thanks to their label, Memphis Industries. Go buy some Go! Team music too.

You can follow *Bullseye* on Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, where you will find video from just about all our interviews—including the ones you heard this week. If you wanna see Victor, he looks like an amazing Matt Berry character. And just seeing him juxtaposed with those rocks? Hoo, boy!

Okay. I think that's about it. Just remember, all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.

Promo: *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.

(Music fades out.)