



## AN INTERVIEW WITH MATTHIAS MÜLLER AND CHRISTOPH GIRARDET

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**Abstract:** Found Footage has never been a genre of itself. It is nothing but a method that can be found in various film genres: it has been applied in underground film as well as mainstream cinema. It has gained a subversive potential within experimental cinema. These days, most images have been in use; they have a long history of being functionalized, of being used and abused for a broad range of purposes.

*When did you start working together?*

**Matthias Müller:** Christoph and I were both studying at the Braunschweig School of Art in the late 80s. This was one of the epicenters of experimental film and video production in Germany then, a place where film artists from all over the country gathered. Christoph and I were already interested in the exploration of found footage then. While Christoph was mostly working in video, I was still working in an analog fashion at the editing bench.

Our methods and styles were quite different from one another, but our main interests obviously were connected. However, we did not co-operate and it took another nine years until we started producing our first mutual work, the *Phoenix Tapes*. It was commissioned by the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford and included in the 1999 exhibition *Notorious* that dealt with the influence of Alfred Hitchcock on contemporary art. This invitation made us work together for the first time.

*How do you develop your work? Are you both involved in all areas of the work such as investigation, editing, and script writing?*

**Christoph Girardet:** In our joint projects we decide everything together, and we do so in a non-hierarchical, egalitarian way, from the very beginnings of our research to the final moment of postproduction. For a film like *Mirror* that is exclusively made of original footage, we also developed script and storyboard together. When our found footage projects require an elaborate process of collecting and selecting shots, we share this time-consuming task. All artistic choices are made together though.

**MM:** No matter how similar our interests may be, we bring quite different qualities into our common work. Finding solutions that are fine for the both of us demands a lot of discussion.

*There are a lot of similarities between your individual bodies of work and the films both of you make together, but what about the differences? I have the impression that*

*there is more humor in your common works.*

**MM:** We are more used to people stating that our compositions are quite refined, and that the work is rather calculated and controlled. Formal decisions are crucial. But they are made in order to enhance the energy, the liveliness and the emotional quality of our work, not to exorcise them.

A film such as *Why Don't You Love Me?*, for example, is dynamic and hilarious because of the very fact that it is rigorously choreographed. On the other hand, producing this film belongs to the most playful of our common activities. During the long processes of developing our works, there are phases of an almost anarchic lack of restraint and phases of analysis and thorough examination.

Luckily, our shared authorship does not reduce one's own impact: all of our joint projects are 100% Christoph and 100% me. They actually add something to what our individual signatures stand for.

**CG:** Collaborating helps us not to get encapsulated in our own worlds. The process of generating these works is an unpredictable one. One of us may come up with a new idea out of the blue, and we then have to discuss this idea and possibly modify our initial concept according to it. Things might be stricter, more conceptual, if we were an artists couple. But we aren't.

**MM:** Yes, this is quite an uncommon constellation. The major challenge is to keep the work as personal and distinctive as possible, no matter how different our individual lives may appear.

*Another difference I find in the montage, but I don't know if this has to do with the fact that you, Christoph, are an editor or maybe with the digital technology that has changed the editing of film and video a lot.*

**CG:** Working mostly with found images since the early 90s, editing belongs to the most crucial skills needed for what I want to achieve artistically. My early works

were always attempts to transform the ephemeral cinematic reality to a more immediate continuum. I do not consider myself an editor. I have been used to working with a smaller amount of material than Matthias, and to treating it in a more rigid way. Sometimes I work with just one shot or a couple of shots. My way of reorganizing this footage may appear more mechanical than the editing techniques in Matthias' work that are more smooth. There is a balance of these two different styles in our mutual projects now.

**MM:** When I started working digitally, back in 1999, Christoph had already gained extraordinary technical skills. He was able to work at a rather high pace, whereas I was used to taking my time in that darkened film editing suite. Digital editing helps to easily try out new ideas and then possibly go back to the previous version the moment you realize it does not work. In film, there is a stronger demand for some kind of master plan. In digital media, on the other hand, you must try hard not to get lost in the broad variety of options.

*For me, your work is very important because of its political implications. Your feminist point of view reminds me of the work of Mark Rappaport. In some of your common works, in *Kristall* and in *Bedroom* (an episode from the Phoenix Tapes) for example, I've recognized Laura Mulvey's idea of sadism demanding a story. I think that you explore this not by telling a story, but through more elemental or superficial aspects of the movies, such as your use of highly ritualized gestures.*

**CG:** Some of our films may be close to certain research results of feminist film theory, but mostly we start with simple conclusions. Take *Kristall*, for instance: Celebrity cult is based on the extensive reproduction of movie-star images, so film scenes of famous actors in mirrors are literally doubling the viewer's desire. However, *Kristall* may be considered an audiovisual example of gender studies as well.

Working on this film we made the observation that quite often when a woman can be seen in mainstream cinema facing a mirror, her reflection gives evidence of the fact that someone is missing. In conventional narratives, this usually

is the male counterpart of the female protagonist. The staging of male characters facing a mirror is remarkably different: here, somebody is actually facing his physical self, his fear of disappearance, his mortality.

**MM:** The way women are being represented in front of a mirror may be understood as a comment on their allegedly inherent narcissism. In the movies quoted by us, women are preparing themselves, painting their faces, brushing their hair and controlling their image in the mirror in order to meet a man.

**CG:** Women are imagining the missing man, whereas men are facing death.

**MM:** We came to this conclusion after watching numerous films and during editing our own one. We actually had not been aware of this before.

*In his book Ways of Seeing John Berger points this idea which I quote: "The mirror was used as a sign of women's vanity. Nevertheless, there is an essential hypocrisy in this moralizing attitude. You paint a woman naked because you enjoy yourself looking at her. If later, you put a mirror in her hand and title the painting Vanity, you are morally condemning this woman, whose nakedness has represented for your own pleasure. (...) But the real function of the mirror was really other. It was made for the woman to accept treating herself mainly as an spectacle." And this idea of women "to-be-looked-at-ness" is especially powerful in Kristall. The first shot shows a diamond necklace, a very revealing variation of your leitmotifs of glass and crystal in this film.*

**MM:** In each and every shot of *Kristall* there is a mirror, sometimes more obvious, sometimes more marginal, but you can also see (and hear) jewellery in this film. In the opening shot, a woman is virtually been tied up, chained by a man who is giving a necklace to her. This is the very moment when melodrama starts to unfold. In a way, this opening shot might be interpreted as an emblem for the way a movie industry dominated by men has been adjusting women to its alleged needs over and over again. John Berger is perfectly right in explaining that other arts have done that,

too.

**CG:** The mirror was considered a very powerful tool of female control in ancient cultures already. It is interesting to compare the scenes showing the destruction of mirrors. When a man destroys a mirror, he is mostly alone and driven by rage while facing his loneliness, or sometimes his monstrosity. When the mirror is demolished by a woman, which is only happening when her sphere was entered by a man, it is an expression of despair about the outcome of the before desired relation. One might read it as an escape from the constraints of her visual representation, but by destroying the mirror as her most important tool this happens at the cost of self-sacrifice. We are always interested in dismantling such more or less visible subtexts.

**MM:** There is one crucial shot in *Kristall* taken from a 60s B movie, *Portrait in Black*. In this movie, Anthony Quinn's aggression is not directly targeted at Lana Turner, but at her mirror image that is brutally smashed by him.

**CG:** He switched to the female perspective, so to say. In fact, this image was the starting point for our project. Even after a long research we were unable to find that motif elsewhere.

*What I also find amazing about your work is the way you work just with gestures in order to create a kind of narration. These gestures are sometimes really dramatic, but sometimes they seem completely empty. In a way, it reminds me of Martin Arnold's work. With his scratch method Arnold brings to the surface a kind of repressed hysteria out of one single shot or scene, whereas you create a similar feeling by using a lot of movies. I am really interested in this narrative component of your work.*

**MM:** In some of his films, Martin Arnold used one movie moment as a kind of archetype of a specific constellation, an example of particular power structures embedded in the imagery.

In Christoph's work of the 90s you can also quite often find hysteric situations

exaggerated and intensified by certain repetitive and varied modes of editing. In our common work,

Christoph and I tend to explore an abundance of cinematic representations looking both for stereotypes and differences, for the established codes of the mainstream and its sometimes surprising meanderings.

*Once you introduced Manual as a sci-fi movie plus melodrama, but we do not find any aliens or extraterrestrials here. Why did you choose only machines, buttons and lines from melodrama? The film seems to deal with male domination, a codified and standardized version of love (which I hate).*

**MM:** The woman lacks any visual representation in *Manual*; she cannot be seen. It is just her disembodied voice recorded on magnetic tape that can be heard. It is lifted off a classic Hollywood melodrama, a women's film (*Pandora and the Flying Dutchman*, 1951), whereas the imagery is mostly taken from sci-fi movies made for male audiences.

The texts whispered by Ava Gardner were written by men, and they have a strong normative power. In our film, the male protagonist becomes the archivist of these recordings repeating them over and over again. The insane concept of total female self sacrifice – “I would give up everything for you” – is a very male idea of how far a woman should go for the sake of love.

**CG:** In many sci-fi movies of the post-war era, technology is turned into a fetish. In the narratives of these feature films you can find hints of the fascination of actual innovations in military engineering, the atom bomb etc. at that time. A lot of problems we are facing now have been generated by this belief system. The imagery of *Manual* represents a man's world, but it is a senseless world: the technical props look rather non-credible, the machines appear to be dysfunctional, and the control panels are mere fakes.

Even if the male sphere of *Manual* is one of supposedly total control and the women's perspective again seems more fatalistic, the issue of domination in *Manual*

is not so obvious: perhaps all the helpless male activities leading to nothing but death are continuously motivated by the calm supremacy of female attendance for self sacrifice. Perhaps a man should go as far as the woman for the sake of love?

*Yes, It is amazing how you show love like something very codified, or at least, this was the feeling I had watching the film, like something from another planet. In order to close these questions about gender roles, I would like to talk about your lonely movie Home Stories, where the house is presented not as a refuge, but as an insane place for a woman to be in.*

**MM:** In a recent interview, my artist friend Aleesa Cohene stated that home is where ideas of normality are cultivated, and where is defined what is proper and comfortable – even if later, it proves to be otherwise. At the same time, home is conventionally considered a place of freedom, a place where we can live up to our needs and desires.

In *Home Stories*, it turns into a women's prison; a critic once stated that in this film home is actually staged as a place where we have to bury our dreams. This is what connects *Home Stories* with some of the examples of the genre it alludes to: melodrama. In some of the movies by Douglas Sirk, for example, we encounter female characters suffering from the burden of rigid social norms: life degrades to an imitation, and this pale imitation is constricted by limitations.

These films criticize certain social circumstances, but they have no solutions to offer. And if they do, they do not seem to have too much faith in them. These movies were made for female audiences, but they have also had a privileged relationship with gay men who do certainly not live outside of patriarchal power, but in an ambiguous and contradictory relationship to it. Thomas Waugh put it like this.

In *Home Stories*, the reason for the increasing paranoia is hidden in the off-screen space. What these women are responsive to is their own cinematic representation, as if their panic and insanity were caused by their own mirror images. Home is a spatial situation that has been allocated to women for many

centuries. However, this does not say anything about the distribution of power within the domestic sphere.

As Mark Wigley explains, it is common to equate “woman” with “house”; he interprets this as a view of the female body as something penetrable and deficient that is caused by the openings of the domestic space: its doors and windows. At the end of *Home Stories*, the women, united by the one and only role offered to them, have a narrow escape; they leave the house through an open door and run into the dark. What is supposed to be an expression of their supposed deficiency, i.e. hysteria, has helped them empower and rescue themselves.

*Let us talk now about the autobiographical component of your work. In this sense, Beacon seems very beautiful to me. It is very personal but signed by two artists. The film is a kind of fusion of your memories?*

**MM:** *Beacon* is mostly composed of travelogue footage shot by Christoph and me independent from one another at ten different locations. All of them are connected by the fact that they are located by the sea. However, they were shot at the Baltic and the Irish Sea, in North Africa and on the Philippines etc: In our montage these shots of remote locales generate one new place of uncertain expectation, a place never seen before. Romantic yearning is being questioned, almost sabotaged though. “Each view has a designer”, we hear the female narrator say.

**CG:** It was interesting to treat our own footage like found material. Some of the images have been shot even ten years earlier and were almost forgotten. The spoken texts give *Beacon* a very personal approach, but they were not written by us. We asked a friend, Mike Hoolboom, to write on a few subjects. We then selected only a small amount of his texts and added these segments intuitively to certain scenes. *Beacon* deals with our subjective memories, but it does so in a rather detached and filtered way, as if they were stated facts.

*Alpsee also appears to be a very personal film; it may not be a strictly autobiographical*

*one, but what I find very interesting in it is the idea that our personality is also a collage, both our own experience and the one that we received via the media. Can you talk about this?*

**MM:** Recollections of my own past encompass individual memories as well as those caused by movies and TV series I saw as a child and books I read. Moreover, they are strangely influenced by films I got to watch many years later, such as Bruce Conner's melancholy evocations of the era of his own childhood. All these disparate elements I tried to paste into one coherent piece in *Alpsee*.

When the young protagonist in my film drops a mug of milk, his feeling of guilt is being acted out by boy actors in feature films. While mother and son do not touch in my own *mise-en-scène*, they do in a cascade of emotionally charged movie clips inserted into my narrative.

Some of the norms and values that shape our personality, parts of our desires as well, we do not inherit from our parents alone, but also from the media that we are exposed to. Regarding our personality a collage consequently also affects our understanding of memory that must appear like an even more heterogeneous mixture of facts and fiction, of revisable knowledge and vague assumption then. This is why *Alpsee* comes closer to a phantasm than a biopic.

*We have been able to watch films like Phantom and Contre-jour that could be called even more "experimental", the first one in a lyrical way, and the second one in the way that it explores the notion of vision. Can you comment this?*

**MM:** *Phantom* to me is another artistic response to a fascination that goes back to my own childhood. My fascination with curtains began when I was a little boy asking my parents for a spare room in our house in order to build a small theatre there; all I needed for this magic transformation was a curtain.

Curtains are both meant for hiding and for most effectively exposing things; they frame expectation and curiosity, enlarging crucial moments of our lives that lead to the final curtain in the end. Beyond the veil, there is the seduction of an

unknown space, the hope of leaving. In *Phantom*, anemic figures, seen in negative, are forced to wander between narratives restlessly. But they are caught in a loop which repeats without end. They are a living dead confined to a cinematic space they cannot leave.

**CG:** With *Contre-jour*, we pushed our work a step further towards abstraction. I consider it the most multi-layered work we have done so far. It is dealing with a lot of issues already brought up in our previous works, but we are challenging them differently here, even denying them sometimes. Everything may seem fragmented and disjointed – but, in fact, this is a very complex and sophisticated composition.

The quality of *Contre-jour* with its demanding and overwhelming structure lies beyond what words can describe; it has to be experienced. When the curtain falls, the viewer might hopefully deal with a variety of thoughts, with notions of vision, of course – in a physical and metaphorical way – but also with topics such as imagination, relationship, presence and absence, the representation of images, the mechanics of cinema and so on.

*In a recent review one of our collaborators put the idea that maybe found footage is becoming a kind of bourgeois cinema in that sense that maybe it has lost its subversion. Do you think that experimental cinema or art have lost their capacity to provoke and subvert?*

**MM:** Found Footage has never been a genre of itself. It is nothing but a method that can be found in various film genres: it has been applied in underground film as well as mainstream cinema. It has gained a subversive potential within experimental cinema. These days, most images have been in use; they have a long history of being functionalized, of being used and abused for a broad range of purposes.

Symbols cannot be read any more the way they were interpreted decades ago. In societies infused with images, we cannot but diagnose a corruption of meaning, a preceding emptying of the original visual semantics. The simultaneity of an increasing circulation of images and an accelerated loss of content has something

exhausting about it.

The image industry has turned us into customers looking for quick-fix satisfiers while withholding true satisfaction. It has become difficult to subvert this mechanism using images produced by this very industry, especially since the boom of found footage filmmaking some 20 years ago. However, I still consider it challenging to try to achieve this.

Now that the use of found footage has become an aesthetic standard, we must learn to look more closely at those films employing this particular technique before we judge them. Capitalism is able to absorb a lot. And the art world is sure flexible enough to turn everything apparently subversive into just another marketable product. There are enough artists out there who cleverly serve this mechanism.

I am afraid that the very moment we expect a work of art to be provocative, its subversive potential is exhausted. Subversion needs the brief moment of surprise, of irritation and shock even, it needs to be unpredictable. Being an artist myself, I generally find it questionable to meet the demands of others. Making films is a rather complex occupation and I consider it just challenging enough to stay true to myself and to avoid pretention. Subversion does not appear on my agenda, authenticity does.

**CG:** Of course, terms like “found footage” or “experimental” are relevant categories in art history. They have been crucial for my own development, too. But I do not consider them essential any longer for my individual working process. Trying to establish an own artistic language based on appropriation is always challenging. But, honestly, I do not care too much if this is subversive or not, even if I believe it might be.

Appropriation has been important in art for a long time. So now, as Matthias said, we do have to examine the works based on this practice more thoroughly. The question of good or bad art lies beyond the issue of political correctness. Strangely enough, especially in the world of cinema, working with found footage is either considered as some sort of infamous exoticism, or as something sacred because of its adopted subversive potential. This is ridiculous.

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