

## **Christoph Schaub**

### **Number of characters: Interview for S AM - Basel**

Evelyn Steiner:

You have developed from a politicised young filmmaker into an established director. Accordingly, your filmography includes documentary films about alternative youth cultures, as well as feature films for a wide audience. In the documentary part of your oeuvre, you have increasingly become a specialist in transposing architectural and urbanist topics to film. How did you get involved in architecture?

Christoph Schaub:

One day, a befriended architect and former flatmate of mine, Marcel Meili, came back home from a journey through Northern Italy and told me about the Girasole house near Verona. He was so enthusiastic about the building that he thought I simply had to make a film about it. I said I couldn't suddenly make a film about a house, because I didn't understand a thing about architecture. After a long discussion, we then decided to realise the film together. Coming from the two disciplines of architecture and film, we supplemented each other wonderfully and I learnt a great deal about architecture. The resulting collaboratively produced film 'Il Girasole - una casa vicino a Verona' (1995) motivated me to continue addressing architecture afterwards because it's actually a very interesting challenge for a filmmaker to engage with spaces.

E.S.:

In addition to your architecture films, you have also realised numerous other documentary films. What exactly are the difficulties when, instead of people, immobile buildings are in the foreground?

C.S.:

When you make films about architecture, the building's architect or occupant is always involved as well. Architecture isn't entirely devoid of people. But of course, a house is very patient and the dialogue with the building is initially very one-sided. This has pros and cons. You can't speak to the house, but you can wait until, for example, the light conditions are right. You engage with the building and get to know it from all sides, inside and out. There are always new stories that arise. At some point, the house also speaks to you, in a certain sense. It's a very contemplative task, which to a great extent, can lead you back to yourself.

E.S.:

In a portrait film in the SRF television series 'CINEMAsuisse', Marcel Meili spoke about the relationship between architecture and film, and added that architecture can't be filmed at all. Do you agree with this statement?

C.S.:

It's right to say that architecture can't be depicted exactly as it is in reality. But you can deliver an interpretation of a space or building on film. You have to do some translation work. That's actually the work that I do when I make architecture films. You have to find personal, visual and emotional means of access, and express

this with cinematic methods. Direct transposition is already rendered impossible by the fact that film can only function as a two-dimensional portrayal of spaces, so it's different to human perception. The way humans receive spaces just can't be imitated with film.

E.S.:

How important is fiction then? For the film 'Il Girasole - una casa vicino a Verona', for example, you hired two actors. The story of a couple is outlined by means of these fictional characters.

C.S.:

With 'Girasole', the idea was to use two fictional characters and an inner voice to also represent the house as a 'memory space', or in other words, a body that resonates history. That's a distinct approach, so as to communicate the history of the building and not just the architecture. Another intention was to use these characters to convey architectural and spatial aspects, such as proportions, depth or the direction of the spaces. The only way that the proportions of spaces can be represented more or less realistically on film is via the proportions of the human being. The dramatic composition of the spatial sequences communicated in the film doesn't match the real spatial dramatic composition of the house if you were to pass through the spaces yourself as an occupant. That's not what we were striving for.

E.S.:

In your films, it's noticeable that you adhere to a static approach with the camera, which implies an objective gaze. A scanning camera moving through the space evokes a more subjective perspective by simulating an inspection. Why do you choose a static neutral gaze, borrowing from architectural photography?

C.S.:

It's to do with the fact that representation of three-dimensional spaces on film, which is actually two-dimensional representation of three-dimensional spaces, is very incomplete. It's a false approach, walking through the building with the camera as if you're a visitor or resident going through the space. As an occupant, I always know what's behind me and what's beside me. But the camera and, later, the film's viewer, only see what's in the frame. So that kind of subjective perception of a person, who is not someone you know, but simply the cameraman, is of no interest as a means of establishing access to, or a relationship with, an architecture. If you perform a camera movement, like a horizontal pan from left to right, for example, there must be some motivation for that movement. For instance, the pan can correspond to the motion of a character discovering a new room or opening up a new room. Otherwise, the camera movement isn't justified, it happens simply for the sake of movement and instead of saying anything about the architecture, it just says something about the person moving the camera.

E.S.:

It's noticeable that mostly amateur filmmakers realise this kind of filmed walk-through with a mobile phone camera and professional filmmakers prioritise the static gaze. This is interesting because, via the static gaze, many things get noticed that appear incidental,

like the rain or the wind. These are things that are very important when perceiving architecture in reality: after all, you don't just perceive the space, but also noises and sounds. For you, how important is the original sound, the architecture's acoustic space, when filming?

C.S.:

Naturally, sound is important because it conveys the third dimension and gives an impression of the dimensions and depth of the space. The same applies to light. Sound design is also a very important tool for creating a mood and an emotional transposition of the architecture.

E.S.:

The combination of moving images of buildings and filmed interviews with architects is a recurring element in your films. To a certain extent, you visualise what the 'authors' explain. What's the significance of commentary in general when creating a documentary record of architecture?

C.S.:

It's banal. Interviews are interesting if the people you interview are interesting. It's fascinating to learn why an architect made a certain decision and what their thoughts are. I believe commentary is a tool that you give the viewers, so that they can understand the architecture. It is very stimulating if, by means of explanation, you suddenly understand or appreciate the statics of a house or bridge, for example. It also means that suddenly there's much more to see and you've learnt something.

E.S.:

Within the domain of the architecture film, there are very different films in your oeuvre, from cinematic approaches to individual buildings, like in the film 'Girasole', through to films that document longer processes, such as 'Bird's Nest - Herzog & de Meuron in China' (2008), which was filmed over four years and documents the process of constructing the Beijing National Stadium. How do the preparations for films differ if, instead of a single building, a project as complex as the Bird's Nest is to be documented?

C.S.:

Naturally, in terms of organisation and language alone, shooting in China is much more complex than in Switzerland. Much more preparation is necessary, but when it comes to the actual filming itself, the procedures are the same. Intrinsically, it's always a matter of finding a distinct position and then presenting it accordingly. You can present a house, a normal person or, likewise, an actor. I find it all very similar. After all, as a director of documentary films, your task is not to portray reality, but to form it and interpret it. In a certain sense, a fictionalisation of reality takes place. This is the only way for it to get fascinating.

E.S.: Could you briefly tell us a little about how 'Bird's Nest - Herzog & de Meuron in China' was made? This film is a multifaceted portrait of not just the building, but mainly of the people actively involved as well. How did you work together with Herzog & de Meuron?

C.S.:

Initially, I wanted to make a film about the building on my own initiative and I wrote a letter to Herzog & de Meuron. They replied, saying that someone was already about to make a film. As a matter of fact, Michael Schindhelm, a friend of Jacques and Pierre who was then Director of Theater Basel, wanted to realise a film about the stadium. But he had little experience with film. So I was brought in, which was naturally very pleasing and interesting for me. We then made the film together. This collaboration was similar to collaborating with Marcel Meili, because Michael Schindhelm also came from a very different standpoint. As a former citizen of East Germany who had studied in the Soviet Union, he was able to contribute a lot towards achieving a better understanding of Chinese reality. He also knew the architects personally.

E.S.:

It's interesting that in 'Bird's Nest', the architecture remains in the background. The film primarily focuses on the various protagonists, but in so doing, it documents the building in a manner that's all the more multifaceted. How important is it to convey a structure via the occupants and the protagonists involved in its construction?

C.S.:

I found the cultural exchange between Switzerland and China during the construction of the building highly fascinating and seminal. Of course, the structure itself is also very interesting. For instance, its form and statics are extraordinary. I think it's an outstanding structure and an exceptional stadium. The film also takes on the task of conveying this. But beyond that, it's mainly urbanist themes that are focused on, such as a neighbourhood development project conducted by Herzog & de Meuron in the provincial city Jinhua. The film strives to address Chinese culture and cultural exchange, as well as the conceptual and contextual architecture of Herzog & de Meuron. In this film, I was able to develop a broad field of interest. In my earlier architecture films, the focus was primarily on the individual architects or structures.

E.S.:

In the representation of architecture in film, there appear to be conventions, established representational topoi and strategies. For example, the bird's-eye view that's well known from other media, such as models, is also used in film. A time-lapse effect is also often used to reproduce the construction process or to convey the interplay between shadow and light, and high-rise buildings are usually documented with vertical camera movements. How do you handle such conventions? Do you try to use them, or to sometimes deliberately undermine them as well?

C.S.:

Those forms of representation don't appear so often in my films. On occasion, I might use a shadow that moves a little more quickly than in reality, but in a barely perceptible way. A helicopter shot is always very effect-oriented. I'm more of a purist and I think the effect or sensation must come from the building itself. So I've

always refrained from using sensational shots like time lapses, or indeed helicopter flights over buildings or districts.

E.S.: What is your attitude towards close-ups?

C.S.:

Close-ups can often be found in my films. I think they're an interesting means of translating architecture. With close-ups, you can show details, materials or, for example, handles that aren't so noticeable at first glance. The house as a whole, its geometry or design, is reproduced primarily via long shots, but the selected materials primarily via close-ups.

E.S.:

What potential does the film medium have in general, with regard to reproducing architecture?

C.S.:

Film has great potential for interpretation of architecture, but you can't reproduce architecture. One example of something that you can almost never do, but which film makes possible, is experiencing a building or bridge in different light conditions and seasons. In summer, a house looks quite different to how it looks in winter, but there's so much time in between that you don't notice this at all. With the cut, with the temporal ellipsis in film, you can make the difference quite physical and show how a house looks in summer, winter and autumn, in sunshine and rain, or at night. I always find that to be a really great experience because it doesn't correspond at all to your normal perception of time.

E.S.:

So what are the limits of this medium?

C.S.:

You reach film's limits if you want to understand architecture in a really geometrical sense. It's also difficult to reproduce the real proportions; they can only be indicated via characters or objects that have an absolute size. For example, you only notice that a door is extraordinarily tall if a person is standing in the doorway. It's also impossible to reproduce a floor plan or cross section in a particularly cinematic way.

E.S.:

Is that the reason why, despite increasingly simple and accessible recording techniques (such as mobile phone cameras), editing programs and distribution platforms, film still plays a very marginal role as a medium of representation and analytical tool with regard to architecture?

C.S.:

In every representation in film, just like in renderings, there's always an illusion as well and architects rightly shy away from that.

Peter Zumthor asked me to make a short film as part of a submission in the competition for the Swiss pavilion at the Hanover Expo. We had a long discussion about how we wanted to make it. In the end, we only filmed close-ups of stacked boards in a sawmill and certain

alignments of the stacks. I found that to be a good way of conveying Zumthor's intentions. It was mainly about the physicality, about physically experiencing wood.

E.S.:

Surely it's also a question of image control. Controlling a whole film is much more difficult than a single image. An individual photograph also has a greater iconic effect and is more readily recognisable. Consuming an image is also quicker and easier than a whole film. In addition, the privileged medium for discussion about architecture is still the book or journal; architects seem to prefer haptic media. So to what extent do your feature films and architecture documentaries feed off each other?

C.S.:

Naturally, these two genres do feed off each other. As a filmmaker, you generally have to engage with space. When shooting feature films, an interest in space is a prerequisite because, after all, you're forced to create a fictional space for the scenes and to develop the orientation of each scene in the feature film. For example, you define a space by deciding how the characters stand in relation to each other; you create an orientation that's more complex than in natural life. Moreover, every space conveys a mood, a certain psychological or emotional expression, and there's also a need for a sensibility or an attitude towards the space, so as to clarify the purpose of each scene.

E.S.: So what role does architecture play in your feature films? In your film 'Jeune Homme' (2006), in which an 18-year-old from German-speaking Switzerland protests against his conservative family by applying as an au pair in French-speaking Switzerland, you appear to purposefully use architecture as a means of expressing the change in social milieu: the cramped lower-middle-class terraced single-family house in the canton Zurich is contrasted with the spacious villa in Western Switzerland, which is flooded with light.

C.S.:

Architecture and the spaces that you assign to characters always say something about the characters as well, about their background, much like a person's clothes, hairstyle or way of speaking. Of course, this calls for very careful selection. The young lead actor comes from a lower-middle-class backwater, a cramped little house without much light. After getting away, he then lives with an upper-class family in a wonderful modern house from the 60s by Lake Geneva. The architectural environment naturally lends this family a very different aura, but also represents the fact that a lot of new things are naturally opening up for the main character.

E.S.:

In the 2015 summer semester, you collaborated with ETH Studio Basel in Casablanca to explore the limits and possibilities of the film medium as an analytical tool for the profession of architecture. Could you briefly tell us something about this collaboration and the findings?

C.S.:

I had the pleasure of working together with Studio Basel, with the professors Marcel Meili and Roger Diener. They invited me to explore

how architecture, the urban space or the landscape can be captured and represented with film. On the one hand, there was a content-based approach; the students researched urban transformations in Casablanca. On the other hand, there was the question of how to represent the results with films and images. I had the task of showing the students how you can film, for example, a neighbourhood, new types of residence or even slums in Casablanca. The students were assigned quite specific topics and they then had two tasks, which I would describe with the phrases 'capturing the site' and 'capturing the dynamics'. 'Capturing the site' was about issues involving recording and representing space. 'Capturing the dynamics' was primarily about the content, about the motion of the city. It was an extremely fascinating and good collaboration with the professors, assistants and students.

#### Biography:

Christoph Schaub, born in 1958 in Zurich, abandoned his German studies to devote himself to film. With others, he co-founded the cinemas RiffRaff, Bourbaki and Houdini in Zurich. His best-known feature films are 'Julia's Disappearance', 'Happy New Year', 'Jeune Homme' and 'Sternenberg'. However, documentary films on architectural and urbanist topics are also an important part of his work. His films attract considerable attention and praise, nationally and internationally.