

CHRISTIAN | FREI



Born in 1959 in Schönenwerd (Switzerland), Christian Frei studied television at the Department of Journalism and Communications of the University of Fribourg. In 1981, he directed his first documentary short film. From the very start of his career, he established a reputation as an exacting documentarist, with a perfect grasp of his subjects. His films are considered to be humanistic and universal, as much as subtle and insistent. In 1997 he presented his first feature-length documentary **Ricardo, Miriam y Fidel**. **War Photographer** marks a turning point in his career as director in 2001. The Oscar nomination for Best Documentary and numerous prizes worldwide led to his international break through. Christian Frei spent two years accompanying war photographer James Nachtwey to different war zones around the world. Still popular with audiences and critics today, the film has become a classic. With **The Giant Buddhas**, Christian Frei once again deals with a subject of strong political and global interest: The film revolves around the destruction of the two giant Buddha statues in Afghanistan's remote Bamiyan Valley. At the Sundance Film Festival in 2010 Christian Frei won the "World Cinema Directing Award" for **Space Tourists** (2009). Critics acclaimed this film for its breathtaking imagery and richness of insights, having strengthened Frei's reputation as one of today's most original and innovative directors. Since 2006, Christian Frei has been an associate lecturer on Reflection Competence at the renowned University of St. Gallen (HSG). Since August 2010 he is president of the Swiss Film Academy.

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Much of the public still regards documentary filmmaking as a secondary genre: possibly more faithful in its relationship with reality, but distinctly less exciting and entertaining, imaginatively and aesthetically poorer than fictional work. In short, a form of cinema better suited to television. And yet, in Switzerland since the end of the 1980s, this discipline has attracted more filmmakers than any other. And fortunately these filmmakers take a quite different view of things – so much so that we are envied in other countries for our “documentary school” (ironic, given the absence of any real cinema school here in Switzerland). It is even possible to argue that the best contemporary Swiss films are documentaries, made specifically for the big screen.

What distinguishes Solothurn-born (but Zurich-based) filmmaker Christian Frei from his many colleagues? Primarily, of course, it is his 2002 Academy Award Nomination for **War Photographer**, the first ever accorded to a Swiss documentary. Even though Frei himself plays down his achievement, saying that it was his subject – the American photographic reporter James Nachtwey, and Nachtwey alone – who won him this honour, anyone who sees this compelling film will readily acknowledge that he truly deserved it. But after just three full-length films (the other two were **Ricardo, Miriam y Fidel**, 1997, and **The Giant Buddhas**, 2005), one is aware of something very distinctive about this Swiss filmmaker. He combines openness to the world, flair for a good subject, an ethical approach to his work and a sense of structure – qualities which are normally found singly, and rarely with such consistency.

Christian Frei's career – which may seem to have developed rather late in the day, almost out of nowhere – is both original and exemplary. Born in 1959 in Schönenwerd, a small town between Olten and Aarau, he discovered his vocation at a very early age. While still at high school, he attended the super-8 filmmaking classes run in Solothurn by Stephan Portmann (1933–2003), one of the founders of the Solothurn Film Festival (started 1966). He has been marked for life by his first attempt at filmmaking, a piece shot in a Capuchin monastery, the high walls of which had aroused his curiosity: “At the age of 18, I discovered that filmmaking opened all kinds of doors, enabling you to discover things that are off-limits in normal circumstances. In addition, filming the discipline of these monks made me face up to the issue of subjectivity/objectivity on the part of the observer.” The result: a short 40-minute film, which was even shown on television, and a lasting fascination with the documentary genre.

Not long after, he enrolled as a student in the Department of Journalism and Communications of Fribourg University, where his teacher was again Stephan Portmann. “It was Portmann who gave me my training”, acknowledges Frei. “But then, I had to free myself from his influence, from a whole way of thinking that was too “post-May '68” for my liking. And so I committed the worst form of

“I think it's important that films reflect Swiss, but also global or universal, realities. When making a film, I strive for authenticity, truthfulness, sound research and real cultural exchange.” Christian Frei. 2005

FILMOGRAPHY

1981	Die Stellvertreterin
1982	Fortfahren (co-director)
1984	Der Radwechsel
1997	Ricardo, Miriam y Fidel
1998	Kluge Köpfe
2000	Bollywood im Alpenrausch
2001	War Photographer
2005	The Giant Buddhas
2009	Space Tourists
2014	Sleepless In New York

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treason, leaving to make corporate films for Ciba-Geigy." After two years in Basle, he returned to Solothurn and made his initial short films, first in video then in 16-mm format, midway between documentary and experimental cinema: **Die Stellvertreterin** (1981, a study of teaching methods, based on observation of a "traditional" class which is taught by a more "free-thinking" supply teacher), **Fortfahren** (1982, a portrait of the sculptor Schang Hutter, made in partnership with Ivo Kummer, currently director of the Solothurn Film Festival) and **Der Radwechsel** (1984, a piece of free association, using a car breakdown as a metaphor for our anxieties, with sequences shot in the United States and in Italy).

Then comes a big gap in the "official" biographies, often glossed over in these terms: "He then worked as a free-lance filmmaker and producer" – a "disappearance" lasting from 1985 to 1995. "In fact, during that period I received commissions to make roughly 70 films", explains Frei. "Not commercials, but corporate and training films. Nothing I need be ashamed of today. I needed to earn a living and I looked on it as a training ground. As a result, I acquired considerable technical expertise, for example in filming from a helicopter, or under water. At the same time, it helped me free myself from my narcissistic tendencies, directing large teams of people or laying rails for tracking shots all over the place. Nowadays, that kind of thing no longer holds any fascination for me. The only thing that matters is a quest for authentic moments, trying to make myself invisible." Having escaped the major traps of his profession thanks to this experience, Frei now wanted only one thing: to continue to make documentaries, the only genre he had ever been passionate about.

"I feel privileged to be able to bring new insight and emotions to the people in a dark cinema. My mission is fulfilled as soon as the audience identifies with the film's characters." Christian Frei. 2004

He felt an urgent need to throw himself into an ambitious project all his own, one which would place higher artistic demands on him. So he decided to go back to square one and approached the Rote Fabrik cultural centre in Zurich, where he still has an office. At a FOCAL seminar given by Slawomir Idziak on the subject of the relationship between filmmaking and image, he got to know chief cameraman Peter Indergand (born 1957), who was to become his closest collaborator. "We are two very different personalities, but maybe that is why we just clicked. At first, he thought me arrogant, but we eventually became friends," explains Frei. "For each film, Peter makes valuable suggestions, so it becomes a real process of dialogue."

The first fruit of this collaboration was a film about Cuba and the demise of revolutionary utopias, entitled **Ricardo, Miriam y Fidel** (initially publicized as "Interferencias").

Ricardo, Miriam y Fidel

SPACE TOURISTS

2010 World Cinema Directing Award, Sundance Film Festival, Park City; Best Photography Award, Beldocs Int. Documentary Film Festival Belgrade; Grand Prix Documentary Feature, Int. Berg- und Abenteuer Filmfestival Graz; Eurodok Award, European Documentary Film Festival Oslo; Special Jury Award, EBS Int. Documentary Film Festival Seoul; Nomination Swiss Film Prize «Quartz 2010», Best Documentary Film

WAR PHOTOGRAPHER

2002 Oscar® Nomination for Best Documentary Feature, Academy Award Nomination; Best Documentary, Int. Film Festival Durban; Phoenix Prize, Cologne Conference; Audience Award; Independent Film Festival Rehoboth Beach; Winner Viewpoint, Filmfestival Gent; Shortlisted for the Grierson Award, British Documentary Award, Category Int. Documentary; Nomination Swiss Film Prize, Best Documentary Film; Winner Docaviv, Tel-Aviv Int. Documentary Film Festival; Audience Award, South African Int. Documentary Festival; Special Prize, Osaka European Film Festival

2003 Winner Documentary and Short Film Festival Pizren; Peabody Award; Audience Award for Feature Documentary, Swisspeaks, Swiss American Film Festival New York; Adolf Grimme Award; Eurodok Award, European Documentary Film Festival Oslo; Gold Panda Award, Best Long Documentary, Sichuan TV Festival; Spectator's Prize One World, Festival of Documentary Film Bratislava

2004 Emmy Award Nomination for Cinematographer Peter Indergand

THE GIANT BUDDHAS

2005 Silver Dove, Dokfestival Leipzig; Winner art-tv Award; Official Selection, Int. Film Festival Toronto

2006 Nomination Swiss Film Prize, Best Documentary Film; Silver Gentian, Mountain Film Festival Trento; First Prize ex aequo, Dokufest Int. Documentary and Shortfilm Festival Pizren; World Documentary Competition, Sundance Film Festival

2007 Gold Panda Award for Best Photography, Sichuan TV Festival; Jury Prize, Int. Berg- und Abenteuer Filmfestival Graz; Prix du meilleur reportage ex-aequo, Festival Int. du Film sur l'Art Montreal

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The first contacts leading to the making of this film were made in 1992. While staying in Cuba and attending the Havana Film Festival, Christian Frei made the acquaintance of Miriam Martínez and her family. Like thousands of other Cubans, Miriam wanted to leave the island, not sharing its "revolutionary" ideal, especially since her doubts – too clearly expressed – had led to her dismissal from the school where she was teaching. But her plans were not facilitated by the fact that her father, Ricardo Martínez, was a former companion-in-arms of Fidel Castro and Che Guevara. Formerly the force behind Radio Rebelde, the legendary radio station of the Sierra Meastra guérilleros, Ricardo had remained a faithful servant of the Communist regime. Here were two ideal characters for someone wanting to explore the Cuban malaise, palpable since the 1980s. Their situation mirrored that of Castro himself and his daughter, who had left to settle in the United States in 1991. Frei was also fascinated by the parallel between Radio Rebelde and the modern-day Radio-TV Martí, an anti-Castro station subsidized by the United States, which broadcasts from the Florida Keys with the same motto of "tell the truth".

Initially sceptical about the film, Miriam and Ricardo were fearful of reopening scars that had only recently healed over. They thought it impossible to talk about feelings and politics in front of a camera. But on the other hand, the film might play the role of mediator, enabling them to talk honestly to each other. In the end, it required three years of preparation, and an authorization undoubtedly emanating from Castro himself, before a start could be made on shooting the film (in video format), in April 1995. This was just a few months before Miriam's departure from Cuba, which had remained in doubt until the very end of the filming process. Fortunately for the filmmaker, she was in fact able to leave. Frei accompanied Ricardo on a pilgrimage into the Sierra Meastra. And finally, he went to record the impressions of Miriam and her husband Augusto in Miami, six months after their going into exile.

A mixture of unrehearsed moments and planned situations, the film was completed in 1997. Requiring a large amount of editing, it bears the marks of its long gestation and development. In the end, however, the drama of this family and the echo effect of the two radio stations over a distance of 30 years, interpolated in masterly fashion, set one another off to perfection.

Ricardo, Miriam y Fidel is far more than an account of individual destinies, set as it is against the crisis of an utopia and a battle of ideologies. Frei expressed this as follows: "At the global level, the failure of Socialism as an alternative to the consumer society has left a gaping void that is affecting a whole generation. Miriam expresses people's need to get information and be allowed to form their own opinions. She is right to complain of the lack of public discourse in Cuba. But she leaves a country subject to censorship for another which is completely saturated with information. She moves from the "country of not enough" to the "country of too much". Hence the

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inevitable failure of her search for happiness. The message of the film, if there is one, lies in the ambivalence of her feelings.”

Though well received on the festival circuit (a good 30 showings), **Ricardo, Miriam y Fidel** did not have an impact commensurate with its ambitions and historical relevance. It would in fact be difficult to find a film which better embodies the idea of the “demise of politics” that has followed the break-up of the Communist bloc. Although the film is unquestionably “political”, it is not “committed” in the same way as the films of the earlier generation; its political commitment lies in its exploration of a new complexity.

Distancing himself, seeking greater objectivity, Frei highlights contradictions and paradoxes, while scrupulously avoiding the temptation to take sides. He plays his cards close to his chest, shows great empathy towards all his interlocutors, examines things critically without ever sitting in judgement and, in the end, leaves the viewer to struggle with the issues he has raised (which range from Ricardo and Miriam’s dyed hair to the place and role of the camera when they say their farewells). All this is done with an attention to story-telling and aesthetics (from the quality of the photography to the sparing use of music) which reinforces the overall impact. With this film, Frei undoubtedly forged a style which he was to develop further in the films that followed.

Kluge Köpfe and **Bollywood im Alpenrausch**

But first came an interlude devoted to television. After producing a scaled-down version of **Ricardo, Miriam y Fidel** for television, and while waiting to make a second documentary for the cinema, Christian Frei was commissioned to make two films for the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation’s DOK programme (the equivalent of the BBC’s Panorama): a quality-minded magazine programme which offers filmmakers very decent working conditions. The fact that it features filmmakers in its official filmography shows a commendable desire to include them, despite the obvious limits of the televisual format (the inevitable 50-55-minute slots, the journalistic style of narration, the dubbing of Swiss German dialect into standard German, and so on).

The first of these films, **Kluge Köpfe** (1998), explored the problem of exceptionally gifted young people. Fairly conventional in format, the real value of this film lies in the sensitivity of its approach to children, three girls aged four, nine and twelve, recorded living their daily lives and never treated as “phenomena”. Meanwhile, the parents, from varying backgrounds, express their bewilderment. Central to the film is psychologist Ulrike Stedtnitz, a specialist in highly gifted children, who explains the great suffering that can arise simply because society does nothing to help people cope with this out-of-the-ordinary situation. The film ends with the opening of the Talenta Schule in Zurich, the country’s first specialized private school, and a militant but inevitably

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oversimplified conclusion (“Can we afford to neglect this undiscovered potential?”). Maybe the film expresses Christian Frei’s concern that exceptional talent should be given expression in a country which evidently prefers its citizens to remain within the limits of mediocrity?

Possibly of wider interest is the second DOK film, **Bollywood im Alpenrausch** (2000), which explores the phenomenon of the Indian commercial films shot in the Swiss Alps since the early 1980s – an entertaining oddity, or indicator of some deeper truth? The film’s sub-title, “Indische Filmemacher erobern die Schweiz” (Indian filmmakers conquer Switzerland), suggests a strange inversion of traditional North–South relations. And even if this idea is not developed to any great extent, in this case everything touched on by the film has implications way beyond its “voice-off” commentary. **Bollywood im Alpenrausch** focuses on the figure of Jakob Tritten, a farmer’s son from Zweisimmen in the Bernese Oberland, who has somehow become a great organizer of these filming sessions and now runs a flourishing little business. Frei observes his way of doing things (“in poor English on both sides”), attends a few sessions (improbable romance and melodrama, with love songs in the Alpine meadows), interviews Indian producers and actors (including the pioneer Yash Chopra and the superstars Shahrukh Khan and Ayshwaria Rai), and even accompanies the 50-something-year-old Tritten on his annual visit to Bollywood, Bombay’s dream factory.

Over and above its attraction for lovers of kitsch, this documentary is somewhat disturbing in that it reveals the existence of a “parallel world” one would have never suspected. En passant, the author portrays an Indian society in which cinema clearly functions as the “opium of the people”, giving rise to a sort of curry-style Hollywood. On the other hand, we encounter a chocolate-box Switzerland, where farmers are a threatened species which sells itself to the most lucrative form of tourism. For the time being, the cultural gap and profound lack of understanding between these two worlds is attenuated only by politeness and the clearly understood interests of either side. Will they eventually begin to engage more seriously and rub off on each other? By way of conclusion, Frei takes a mischievous first step: in Bombay, he puts up a hoarding painted in the Indian style of for **Bollywood im Alpenrausch** – a film as unlikely to be screened over there as most Bollywood films are to be shown in cinemas here in Switzerland...

War Photographer

The main point of these two commissions was that they enabled Frei to make ends meet while he was working on a personal project he had had in mind since 1997. It was in an aeroplane, on the way to a festival in Chicago, that he was first struck by the work of the American photographer

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James Nachtwey (born in 1948 in Syracuse, NY), seeing one of his reports on Afghanistan in the German magazine Stern. He soon tracked Nachtwey down and found him to be an engaging personality, the diametrical opposite of the hardened and cynical war correspondent. But their first contact was disappointing. Not wanting to be disturbed in his work, by its very nature solitary, nor to endanger lives other than his own, Nachtwey initially turned down the idea of a documentary. It took a great deal of persistence and inventiveness to overcome his reluctance. In particular, it took four months to design, with the help of engineers from Swiss Effects in Zurich, a robust and easy-to-control mini film camera which could be fitted to Nachtwey's own camera in such a way as to show things from his perspective without inhibiting him.

For two years, Frei and his cameraman Peter Indergand followed Nachtwey on a number of missions to Indonesia, Kosovo and, finally, Palestine. These were not always situations of open conflict, because Nachtwey was equally committed to exposing the reality of poverty. But whatever the nature of the mission, violence was on the agenda, making the shooting a very testing exercise. As Nachtwey took photographs, Indergand filmed him from a distance with his big Digital Betacam, while Frei controlled the images and sound remotely. The film was supplemented with stories from colleagues of Nachtwey's and a visit to the photographer's New York apartment/laboratory, at the time of an exhibition featuring his work. **War Photographer** was completed in the autumn of 2001 (before Nachtwey's famous reportage on 9/11).

A portrait of an exceptional man in extreme situations, **War Photographer** is also Christian Frei's most compelling film. It nevertheless raises a whole host of questions in the viewer: about humanistic commitment, the need and best way to bear witness to the worst in human nature, respect for others and the principle of avoiding direct intervention, voyeurism, media bias, and so on. Its impact has less to do with any supposed danger (Frei avoids the temptation to create suspense or glamour) than with encountering a fascinating and mysterious character, a sort of modern Don Quixote, a gentleman parachuted into a barbarian environment, who seems to have transcended all the ambiguities of his profession. Sometimes, his code of behaviour seems shocking, his embracing of danger madness, his sacrifices pointless. And yet, we end up understanding why he acts as he does.

Too flattering a portrait? The suspicion is soon swept away, so much is modesty integral to Nachtwey's character. Armed with a surprising mixture of realism and idealism, he devotes himself body and soul to his craft, trying to raise people's awareness so that things will change, so that the tide of war, poverty and injustice will at last begin to ebb. Clearly awed, Frei had found his master, but nevertheless did not harp on his own eclipse. Completely at the service of his subject matter, he too kept himself in the background. Filmed without apparent artistry,

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War Photographer is nevertheless a model of how to construct a film. It gradually develops the portrait of its subject, plays intelligently on the role of the spectator and hints at the contradictions of the reporter's task, even before raising them openly. A few musical items from the ECM catalogue (Arvo Pärt, Eleni Karaindrou, David Darling), chosen with the help of Manfred Eicher, combine fairly satisfactorily with these often terrible images, having a distancing effect and adding a necessary touch of spirituality.

We all know what happened next: nominated for an Oscar in 2002, awarded prizes at a dozen international film festivals, **War Photographer** was sold in almost 50 countries (in its 96-minute cinema version and its 52-minute television version) and became the Swiss film industry's success story of the year. Frei: "If the Academy had been aware of my working method, I would never have been nominated! My office is at the Rote Fabrik, unofficial headquarters of the alternative scene in Zurich. With the exception of my cameraman and one assistant, I work on my own. I even take care of the production side. Where the shooting is concerned, it is an advantage; it means you are a great deal freer. But it is obviously not the way to earn a lot of money..."

The Giant Buddhas

A success of this magnitude calls for confirmation. To those who still saw it as a fluke, Christian Frei replied in no uncertain terms with **The Giant Buddhas** (2005), a no less remarkable achievement. The destruction by the Taliban in March 2001 of the giant Buddhas of the Bamiyan Valley in Afghanistan was the trigger for this new film. But its theme was far broader than a simple attempt to revisit this event. In the final analysis, it was more of an "essay" – in the form of a travel documentary – on faith and fanaticism, tolerance and terrorism, identity and ignorance, the ephemeral and our feeble attempts to preserve it.

It was a good year after the event that Frei was contacted by Swiss restorers involved in a reconstruction project. Two now-empty niches in an out-of-the-way valley, lots of Western technology, nothing really human and emotional to work on: Frei was initially not very keen. But after a few hours of surfing the web, he was persuaded that this was an excellent starting point for a film. A long period of research, making contacts and tracking down evidence was still necessary to decide on the thrust and theme of the film, which was far more complex than its predecessors.

In the end, it took Frei and Indergand, again working alone on this venture, 24 weeks of filming to bring back the raw material they needed. This is partly explained by the geographical reach of the film: it embraces Afghanistan, of course, but also China (including the incredible "Buddha Park" in Leshan), Qatar (the premises of the Arabic television channel Al-Jazira in Doha), Canada (Toronto,

Norbert Creutz was born in 1963 in Geneva, of a German father and a French mother. A historian and librarian by profession, he is a cinema enthusiast above all as a result of being so inclined. A fact which leads him straight to the profession of film critic. A member of the University Cinema Club, he became a regular contributor to the "Journal de Genève" in 1988, then, starting in 1998, to the French-speaking daily "Le Temps". Also took part in the adventure of the monthly "Film(s) – revue suisse de cinéma" (Film(s) – Swiss cinema review), published in Lausanne (1999–2003). Married with one daughter, he still lives in Geneva.

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home of the Afghan writer Nelofer Pazira), France (the University of Strasbourg, base of the archaeologist Zémariya Tarzi), and so on. But the long period of filming was also determined by aesthetic considerations: to secure the finest possible images, they often had to wait for the evening light. Because, this time, Frei also wanted his film, though shot with a Digital Betacam, to make a stunning visual impact. This certainly paid off when the film was screened: one could easily believe it was shot in 35-mm format. And all this was capped by a new technological exploit: the reconstitution in synthetic 3D imagery of the celebrated Buddhas, based on a hundred or so photographs.

But **The Giant Buddhas** was above all a triumph of organization. Rarely has a film required more intelligent travelling – from Bamiyan to Bamiyan, taking in some remote and totally unexpected locations on the way. The past (evoked in a journey made by the Chinese monk Xuanzhuang, who described the Buddhas in the 7th century) and the future (reconstruction projects sponsored by UNESCO and the Zurich Federal Institute of Technology) are compared and contrasted to further stimulate the imagination. As for the human interest, it finally emerges in the shape of a displaced cave-dwelling family, the homecoming of the émigré writer and her archaeologist colleague, not to mention the ambiguous role of Taysir Alony, the only journalist to have brought back pictures of the dynamiting (and since suspected of collusion with Al-Qaeda...). ECM music and unobtrusive narration complete the picture. As if by a miracle, the film sets up a complex system of echoes, inviting the viewer to consider a hundred times more questions than would have been raised by a straightforward journalistic account or reportage of the event.

Launched at the 2005 Locarno Festival, the film did not attract the Hollywood endorsement of its predecessor, but it was screened at even more prestigious festivals (40 or so in all), setting the ultimate seal on its author's reputation.

Will Christian Frei be able to maintain such high standards in future? Though his resources may appear fragile, almost derisory when set against the magnitude of the subjects that interest him, he clearly possesses the necessary skills and capacities. In the wake of Jacqueline Veuve and Richard Dindo, his career is undoubtedly the most consistent and trail-blazing in the history of Swiss documentary cinema. He provides the example of an alternative form of globalisation, which dares to confront the growing complexity of the present era after the collapse of the old ideologies and the reduction of the world to a mere commercial proposition. The fact that this approach can also produce some very fine cinema (intellectually and morally, as well as aesthetically) is one of the most encouraging straws in the wind today. Norbert Creutz, Mai 2006

Written and directed by:
Christian Frei
Cinematography: Peter Indergand

Editing: Christian Frei, Lara
Hacisalihzade
Sound: Judy Karp, Florian Eidenbenz
Music: Max Richter, Eleni Karaindrou,
Giya Kancheli

Production: Christian Frei
Filmproduktion GmbH, Zürich; T
044/481 70 66, SRF Schweizer Radio
und Fernsehen, SRG SSR; ZDF/ARTE

World Sales: Films Transit
International Inc., Montréal
www.filmstransit.com
Original Version: English (german
subtitles)

Romance and Heartbreak is Rarely As Moving As *Sleepless in New York*. (...) The marvelous thing about director Christian Frei is how he gets the viewer to care, deeply, about the pathetic whining creatures in his latest documentary (...) It goes its own way stylistically, structurally, musically and sonically in telling the stories of people in the throes of a recent breakup, and how they cope – or, obviously, not. John Andersen, *Indiewire.com*, 06.05.2014

Even if the theme is definitely different to those we may be more used to, more anchored in a specific type of social reality (from the contradictions of a chimeric Cuba to the literally stratospheric excesses of space tourists), the latest documentary by Christian Frei does not betray his acute, profound and extremely modern vision of the world. His vision is able to suggest without imposing, giving us the richness of an infinity of (unexpected) reflection points. His particular way to look at the world is able to pick up on the most subtle of situations, making himself the (discreet but strong) main character from his film. Giorgia Del Don, *Cineuropa.org*, 22.4.2013



| 2014

| DCP

| colour

| 92'

Paralyzing, tormenting and overwhelming... Often laughed off as nothing more than an affliction of adolescence, lovesickness becomes the topic of a documentary film. The director and his cinematographer dive into the frenzied nights of the newly rejected. Nights full of pain and tears, yet also wakefulness and creativity. Anthropologist Helen Fisher researches the astounding and profound processes that are unfolding in the brain of the lovesick. Has nature overdone it? The film explores the difficult path out of self-destructive obsessive behaviour, toward a new self.

Script: Christian Frei
Camera: Peter Indergand, scs
Sound: Florian Eidenbenz

Editing: Christian Frei, Andreas Winterstein
Music: Edward Artemyev, Jan Garbarek, Steve Reich

Production: Christian Frei
Filmproduktion, Zürich; Schweizer Radio und Fernsehen; ZDF/ARTE
World Rights: Christian Frei
Filmproduktionen, Zürich

World Sales: Films Transit International Inc., Montreal
Original Version: Russian/English/Romanian (german/french subtitles)

Space Tourists is a multi-dimensional glimpse into dreams and obsessions. Filmmaker Frei smartly interweaves the pride that many felt because of the space program's accomplishments while visualizing its down-to-earth, economic failings. Cinematographer Peter Indergand's scopings are expressively accented by the fine editing of Frei and Andreas Winterstein: The images, glorious and crude, butt against each other – evocative of this Quixotic quest. Duane Byrge, *The Hollywood Reporter*, January 26, 2012

Well worth mentioning is the singular *Space Tourists*, an elegantly shot, almost surreal look at elements and offshoots of the Russian space program, including how \$20 million got an American businesswoman shot into space. *Los Angeles Times*, January 19, 2010

Frei is undoubtedly the most universal and, in equal measure, the most concrete philosopher among the contemporary documentary filmmakers. ... With impressive structure and cinematography, he interweaves his dramaturgic tableaux in a broad context, soaring high to the artistic realm of documentary filmmaking. Ralf Schenk, *Film Dienst*, July 22, 2010

In the twilight hours with its magical light (camera: Peter Indergand) and highlighted with a highly suggestive soundtrack, the film evolves into an alluring parable about the glamour and reality of a human dream. Martin Walder, *NZZ am Sonntag*, September 20, 2009



| 2009 | 35 mm | colour | 98'

The film takes a humorous and laconic view of the way billionaires depart our planet earth to travel into outer space for fun. **Space Tourists** succeeds in surprising its audience with images and situations that have very little to do with the futuristic fantasy of "space-tourism". This is set in contrast to the crazy trips taken by Kazakh rocket debris collectors in their hunt for the coveted carrot-shaped rocket stages, which literally fall out of the sky and are collected by men with trucks the size of dinosaurs. The filmmaker sets up encounters with the least likely people imaginable: places even stranger and more unknown than outer space itself. The documentary investigates the emotional oscillations of an expensive enterprise and questions the meaning and boundaries of the human spirit and our hunger for adventure and discovery.

"Unobtrusively and without moral judgement, Frei succeeds in clearly illustrating the consequences of an unleashed belief in technology here with spectacular images, but without losing sight of the basic virtues of cinema for one moment: to entertain." Geri Krebs, *Der Landbote*, October 28, 2009

Script: Christian Frei
Camera: Peter Indergand, scs
Sound: Florian Eidenbenz

Editing: Christian Frei, Denise Zabalaga
Music: Philip Glass, Arvo Pärt, Jan Garbarek, Steve Kuhn

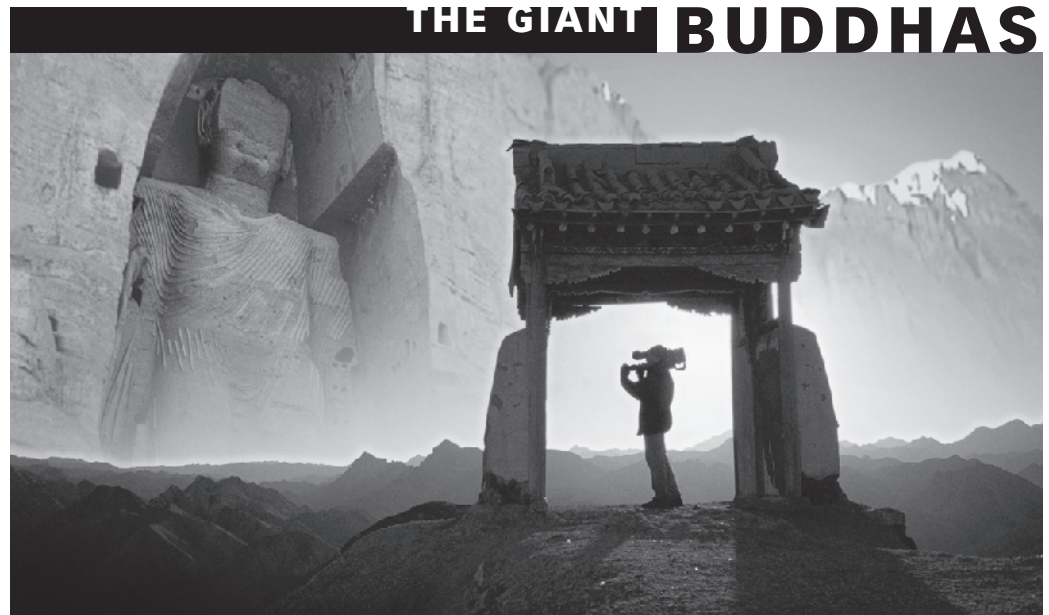
Production: Christian Frei
Filmproduktionen GmbH
World Rights: Christian Frei
Filmproduktionen GmbH

World Sales: Films Transit
International Inc. Canada
Original Version: Dari/Arabic/
Mandarin/French/English

This journey into the Bamiyan Valley is so much more than a tribute to two desecrated monuments, more than a masterful piece of research. Christian Frei knows how to tell a story. He fills those niches with memories. At the end of this opulent cinematic meditation, the Buddhas are more alive than ever. *Metropolis*, December 15, 2006

Each new scene raises a new aspect of the topic. In this, Frei appears as an archaeologist himself, tracing, collecting pictures and archive material, and as a result of this painstaking task revealing context and background. Instead of providing ready-made answers, this equally fascinating and poetic essay film offers a wealth of food for thought thanks to its complexity, its accurate insight into foreign cultures and its breathtaking landscape photography. Walter Gasperi, *Independent Pictures*, September 22, 2005

The Giant Buddhas places us at a fascinating intersection of politics, religion and culture. Frei's account ranges from the horrifying to the comic, and in the process delivers as much fresh information as I've ever absorbed from a single documentary. *The National Post* (Canada), September 1, 2005



| 2005 | 35 mm | colour | 95'

Six months prior to the attack on the Twin Towers in New York, two giant Buddha statues were blown up in the remote valley of Bamiyan in Afghanistan. The drama of the colossal stone figures – unique evidence of an advanced civilisation that flourished along the Silk Road until the 13th century – is the starting point of a film essay about fanaticism and diversity, terror and tolerance, ignorance and identity. What did life sound like here 1,500 years ago? What did it smell like? Christian Frei's film conjures up the past, explores the present, searches for a whole range of aspects, finds poetry and depth. The film is a journey along that multifaceted line that both separates and links people and cultures.

"I regard my film as a hymn to the diversity of opinions, religions and cultures. Nobody – neither the Taliban nor the US – should force homogeneity or standardisation on the rest of the world. So the unagitated tone of my narrative about the fanatical iconoclasm of the Taliban is also my political message. Of course it is an act of ignorance to knock off the head of a defenceless statue and to destroy it." Christian Frei

Script: Christian Frei
Camera: Peter Indergand, scs
Sound: Florian Eidenbenz,
Martin Witz, Ingrid Städeli

Editing: Christian Frei,
Barbara Müller
Music: Eleni Karaidrou,
Arvo Pärt, David Darling

Production: Christian Frei
Filmproduktionen GmbH,
Swiss Television
World Rights: Christian Frei

Filmproduktionen GmbH
World Sales: Films Transit
International Inc. Canada
Original Version: English/German

What this film shows most of all is the quality that makes James Nachtwey not only one of the most courageous but also one of the most excellent war reporters – absolute calmness. It seems as if the adrenalin of the combat zones slows down each of his movements to slow motion. In a scene of a Kosovar family becoming almost hysterical with grief, you will detect Nachtwey only at second glance, standing still in the midst of the chaos. It is precisely through this calmness that James Nachtwey personifies the virtues of war journalism. He keeps a clear view, remains respectful and can thus channel his emotions into the camera. Indeed, it is his pictures, not he himself, that tell the story. Andrian Kreye, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, July 11, 2002

The insecurity of accompanying today's most renowned and successful war photographer is what makes Christian Frei's documentary film *War Photographer* so powerful. A state of suspended animation sets us in motion because it puts the photographs known from *Time Magazine* or from *Geo* into the context of their own story. Between identifying and letting our emotional gaze wander beyond the photograph's limits, space opens up for questions and doubts that also reappear in conversations. [...] The cinematic image, and with it its space for distance, transforms into the mirror of its object, until Frei's *War Photographer* itself almost looks like a photograph taken by James Nachtwey. Jan Distelmeyer, *Die Zeit*, July 11, 2002

WAR PHOTOGRAPHER



| 2001

| 35 mm

| colour

| 96'

“Every minute I was there, I wanted to flee. I did not want to see this. Would I cut and run or would I deal with the responsibility of being there with a camera?” (James Nachtwey). In one of the world's numerous disaster areas, in the midst of suffering, dying, violence and chaos, photographer James Nachtwey searches for an image which he thinks could be published. A film about an equally committed and shy person who is considered the most famous and courageous war photographer of our times – yet a person who hardly fits the stereotype of a tough warhorse. “What I capture”, says Nachtwey, “will be part of the eternal archive of our collective memory. And I know that photos can force those responsible to act. Nobody would have intervened without the pictures of civil war and famine in Somalia. The war in Bosnia might still not have come to an end without the photos taken there.”

Christian Frei used special micro-cameras attached to Nachtwey's camera. We watch a famous photographer seeking the “moment of truth”. We can hear him breathe. The spectators turn into immediate witnesses of his search for an image of war.

Script: Christian Frei,
Christina Rachmühl
Camera: Peter Indergand, scs
Sound: Martin Witz

Editing: Christian Frei, Damaris
Betancourt, Jorge Abello
Music: Arturo Sandoval, Laurent
Valdes

Production: Christian Frei
Filmproduktionen GmbH
World Rights: Christian Frei
Filmproduktionen GmbH

World Sales: Films Transit
International Inc. Canada
Original Version: English/Spanish

Christian Frei set out with his camera to explore the current situation in Cuba, the result being a documentary that is sustained by powerful images, that testifies to technical skill, a professional way of dealing with the material and, most importantly, a carefully deduced and clear message: the two protagonists, Ricardo and Miriam, reflect the tension between a revolution that has already turned into history and the present that in fact seems to be taking place elsewhere. *Der Bund*, June 10, 1997

Ricardo, Miriam y Fidel is a unique film in that it portrays a political conflict, showing both sides of one and the same coin. A masterpiece! Jean Perret, director *Visions du Réel*, Nyon, 1997

A moving documentary that delves into an older generation's commitment to its country and revolutionary ideals, and a younger generation's search for a new life in the United States – and the disenchantment both encounter. Chicago Latino Filmfestival, 1997



Like thousands of other Cubans, Miriam Martínez and her family want to emigrate. Yet being the daughter of a man who made a substantial contribution to the success of the Revolution, this is no easy decision to make. Almost forty years ago, when she was still a little girl, her father had given up his job as a radio journalist in Havana and moved to the Sierra Maestra to join the rebels of Fidel Castro. Under the leadership of Che Guevara, he founded Radio Rebelde. Their night broadcasts became the most effective means of spreading their revolutionary ideas. Today the golden promise of that break with the past has faded. Ricardo's dream has not come true. And for Miriam, there's no turning back. She wants to change her life, even if she is already anticipating that venturing into the "free world" has little to do with the ideals of her youth.

"*Interferencias* was the working title of this documentary, an intense one-and-a-half hour film that deals with interferences at various levels. **Ricardo, Miriam y Fidel** shows a strong father-daughter relationship against the background of the 38-year-old guerrilla war between Cuba and the USA, an obsolete conflict that has long adopted surreal and obsessive traits. [...] Frei manages to convey authenticity and not to present his protagonists as «broken» right from the beginning. For the time being, he merely registers phenomena the way they are – that, too, is part of the art of documentary films." Geri Krebs, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, May 23, 1997

DER RADWECHSEL

1983/84 | 16 mm | colour b/w | 24' | Changing the Wheel

This short film is an attempt at tackling the topic of 'breakdown' associatively using three different media: firstly, photos of people on the motorway. Frei accompanied a TCS (Touring Club Schweiz) breakdown van and captured the diverse situations the mechanic encountered. Secondly, a video portrait of a drive-in clinic in Memphis (USA) – all these clinics are located along very busy arterial roads and frequently within shopping centre complexes. And finally, pictures from a factory in Milan that produces breakdown triangles. These pictures show women at work and lay-offs that lead to strikes. The starting point for this documentary film essay was Berthold Brecht's poem *Der Radwechsel (Changing the Wheel)*. "The breakdown becomes a metaphor of that which is disturbing, obstructive, unfamiliar, alien, inexplicable – and of our inability to come to terms with it." Christian Frei



Script: Christian Frei
Cinematographer: Urs Kohler
Editing: Pius Morger
Music: Ben Jeger

Production: Christian Frei
World Rights: Christian Frei
Original Version: English/Italian

FORTFAHREN

1982 | 16 mm | colour, b/w | 40' | Moving On

The sculptor Schang Hutter leaves Solothurn and moves to Hamburg. He leaves the town where he grew up and worked for over 20 years. He has become homeless, he says, because he can no longer work. The film tells the story of one who belonged there, who makes figures of wood and iron. It is the story of his church studio, of architectural conservation, of the bricked fireplace and the cold in winter. And then there are those who try to explain what caused his emigration: writer Peter Bichsel, the town's mayor and other important citizens get to give their opinions. We see Hutter among his removal boxes, ready to leave. Why is he leaving? What exactly does 'moving on' mean?



Script: Christian Frei, Ivo Kummer
Camera: Dani Leippert, Rob Gnant, Urs Kohler, Christian Frei
Sound: Ivo Kummer
Editing: Urs Graf, Christian Frei, Ivo Kummer

Music: Ben Jeger
Production: Christian Frei, Ivo Kummer
World Rights: Christian Frei, Ivo Kummer
Original Version: German

DIE STELLVERTRETERIN

1981 | U-Matic | colour | 24' | The Substitute

The film portrays a young female teacher who tries to break out of the «established» role while substituting for a colleague. We see her in class, in the staff room, preparing lessons and correcting papers. These observations are juxtaposed with excerpts from a speech of the former minister of education, the portrait of a pupil, and excerpts from a conversation with young teachers about their experiences on the job. Not a single scene is staged. Thanks to a video expert and the elaborate technical equipment, it was possible to work in a way that allowed the pupils to act completely natural after only two days. **Die Stellvertreterin** shows the efforts of many young teachers to get their bearings in primary schools. The film addresses problems such as substitute teaching and authority and discipline at school and at home.



Script: Christian Frei
Camera: Hanspeter Leuthold,
Christian Frei
Sound: Darius Köhli
Editing: Ivo Kummer

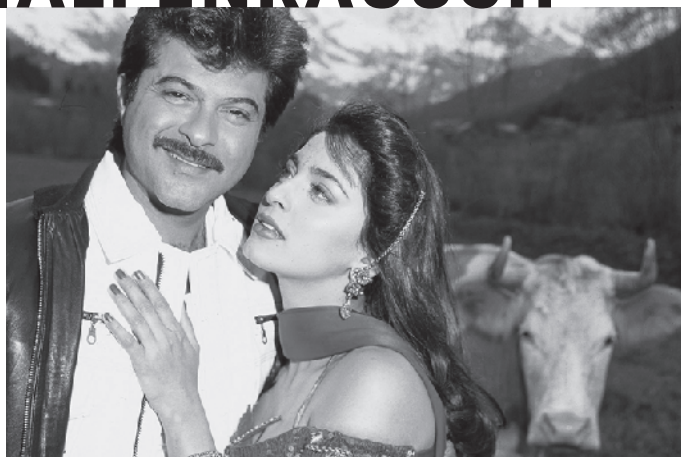
Music: Olaf Järmann, Andreas Ruch,
Hans Peter Häuptli
Production: Christian Frei
World Rights: Christian Frei
Original Version: German

BOLLYWOOD IM ALPENRAUSCH

| 2000 | Digital Beta | colour | 52' | Bollywood in Alpine Rapture

India's most beautiful romantic movies are shot in Switzerland. The Swiss Alps have been considered the most popular film location for shooting Indian tearjerkers for some years now. Christian Frei watched the Indians filming in the Bernese Oberland and at Bombay film studios. His film focuses on Jakob Tritten from Zweisimmen in the canton of Bern, who was the first travel agent to have the courage to take Indian film crews up the Alps in the mid 1980s. His success resembles the story of a Hindi film.

In India several million people pour into the cinemas each day to escape poverty, unemployment and oppression. And they get to know the Swiss mountains at the same time. The documentary film maker also shows that more and more Indian tourists are travelling to Switzerland to see the impressive film set – which to them is paradise – in real life. Vijay Kumar Sing, *Tages-Anzeiger*, December 15, 2000



Script: Christian Frei
Camera: Hans Witschi
Sound: Bernhard Göttler
Editing: Angelo Prinz

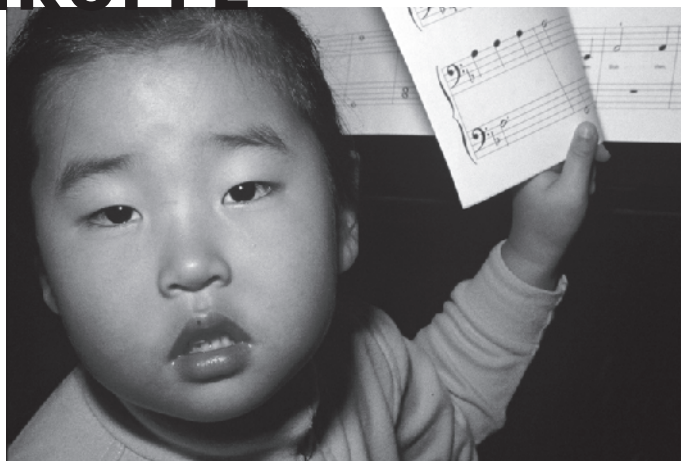
Music: Hans Kennel ua.
Production: Swiss Television
World Rights: Swiss Television
Original Version: English/German

KLUGE KÖPFE

| 1998 | Digital Beta | colour | 53' | Bright Minds

In **Kluge Köpfe** Christian Frei takes a closer look at prejudice in the context of highly gifted children. The film tells the story of three extraordinarily intelligent girls: 4-year-old Bomi, who has already read over 500 books and solves complicated brainteasers on the computer, 9-year-old Melanie K., who comes from a working-class family, and 12-year-old Mélanie H., who almost killed herself out of sheer boredom and lack of challenge. There are special schools and learning programmes for less intelligent children of that age, so highly gifted children should be entitled to support as well.

"The film's main intention is to eliminate prevailing prejudice," says Christian Frei. For instance, the idea that these children's intelligence is only imagined by their overly ambitious parents. Or that these children are robbed of their childhood. Highly gifted children are not miraculous beings, but really quite normal children. The three portrayed girls clearly show this. The spectator immediately develops a strong emotional relationship to the three prodigies. Not because they are better at maths, spelling, thinking or deducing than their peers, but because they are really just normal children. And because we recognise their suffering, we frequently sympathise with them and understand their problem – one that shouldn't really be a problem. And because, despite their cheerfulness, we see the loneliness in their faces. The loneliness of an unappreciated minority. Andi Kämmerling, *TR7* No. 51, 1998



Script: Christian Frei
Camera: Werner Schneider
Sound: Peter Greub
Editing: Daniel Vonplon

Cast: Bomi Song, Melanie Koller, Mélanie Huser uva.
Production: Swiss Television
World Rights: Swiss Television
Original Version: German