

FIRE FIRE DESIRE - The new feature film by Steff Gruber

Chris Jarvis interviews Steff Gruber - Phnom Penh, Cambodia, 12 December 2013

CJ: Steff Gruber, your new film *Fire Fire Desire* begins with a quote from the Swiss writer Martin Suter.

SG: The quote comes from an interview that the Swiss newspaper "NZZ am Sonntag" conducted with Suter in 2012. Suter says: "It is a subversive act not to resign oneself to getting older, but to do something to get back to a better time". There's no better way to sum up my motivation to make this film. My male protagonists in the film and I personally fight against aging. On all levels: Mentally, emotionally and physically. My leading actor Geoffrey Giuliano, for example, has plastic surgery performed...

CJ: You're talking about your male protagonists. Is *Fire Fire Desire* a man movie?

SG: I wouldn't say that. The female protagonists have a lot to say. Above all the nymphomaniac Jessica.

CJ: You haven't heard from them for almost 20 years. Why does it always take so long for you to present a new film?

SG: There are several answers to this question: First, filmmaking is not my bread and butter profession, but my passion. I only have a few hours a day to work on my films. Nevertheless, it's not a hobby. I have its own production company, KINO.NET AG. We have highly professional editing suites and a recording studio. However, the main reason for the fact that several years always pass between my films is not only due to the limited time, but also my special production form. I must also add that in the 20 years you mentioned I made two feature-length films, but they did not become very popular. *Secret Moments* was broadcasted late at night on Swiss television and I have never published *Passion Despair*...

CJ: Most of your films are so-called docudramas...

SG: Yes, that's what we called our special style in the 1970s and 1980s. Today I call my way of making films "personal films". This name also says something about the approach and especially the motivation. The term docudrama refers more to the technical side, i.e. the mixed form of documentary and feature film. However, I'm not very interested in whether the material in a film is documentary or staged. What ultimately counts for me is the end product. And here it is very important to me that a film comes close to reality, or to what I perceive to be true. I am interested in the truth and not in ideologies.

CJ: Can you tell us more about what you mean by "personal film"?

SG: I didn't invent the term out of games. I am constantly asked: What kind of films do you make? Documentaries or feature films? You also have to choose between these two genres on questionnaires, for example for film festivals. But that's not possible with my films. And both

can usually not be ticked. With my subgenre invention, the "Personal Film", I leave this question unanswered and can speak directly about my concern. This stands first. I don't do heuristics in the sense of "about what should I make a film next? Nor do I get any themes from television stations or producers. I have to make another film, I dream about it or have sleepless nights. It's true demons that haunt me there. The themes that occupy me are all already there, as sleepers in my head. When they wake up, I almost can't stand it. I start researching, earlier in libraries and scientific institutes, today mainly on the Internet and through literature. I'm not interested at all in whether the topic is trendy or commercially promising. The only thing that counts is that I am personally interested and obsessed with it. My "Personal Films" are a mixture of documentary and feature films, classic docudramas as defined by Wim Wenders in the 1980s. Today, however, the genre definition of docudrama is understood differently. They're not essay films either... they're personal films!

CJ: You mentioned that you never showed your last film *Passion Despair*. Why?

SG: ...exactly. You should never have done it. All my colleagues had already advised me against it in advance.

CJ: *Passion Despair* is a portrait of a paedophile photographer...

SG: Yes. I had to make the movie. I had to take the risk of the film failing.

CJ: Why?

SG: I just didn't want to believe that the world today is so undifferentiated. I'm an alto-68 who questions everything first and doesn't know the answers beforehand. That was the case with *Passion Despair*. I met paedophile people who never committed any crimes in their lives and who certainly never will. The film portrays such a person. But already to say this violates the today omnipresent "political correctness". A television editor asked me if one would see the arrest of my protagonist at the end of the film. I was horrified and speechless. The distributors didn't even want to watch the film in the first place, because they - quote - "couldn't look me in the eye afterwards". Imagine that! I come from a time in which one always only formed an opinion after dealing with something or, in my case, after seeing the film. Not so with pedophilia. Here and now. The whole world shares one opinion in unison. Murder, for example, can be discussed, erotic fantasies not...

CJ: They really talk each other into rage...

SG: Yes, even though I have long since come to terms with how most people work. The reason is that I just don't want to understand that today you're not curious anymore. Open to the different, the incomprehensible...

CJ: Back to your Personal Films: Was *Passion Despair* also a personal topic?

SG: You mean pedophilia? No, it's not. I don't like children, if that's what you mean. My interest was rather to investigate a social taboo. I also have to say that *Passion Despair* is a purely documentary film, not the mixed form that I usually prefer...

CJ: Your film about Werner Herzog and Klaus Kinski is also a documentary.

SG: Yes, *Location Africa* is also a purely documentary film made for ARD. But the motivation to make this film was also very personal. Like Wim Wenders, Werner Herzog was a "personal filmmaker" for me; a driven man who had to tell his stories.

CJ: Soon your new film *Fire Fire Desire* will come to the cinema. Could you tell us something about your approach with this film?

SG: *Fire Fire Desire* is a classic personal film. Like before *Moon in Taurus* (1978), *Fetish & Dreams* (1985) and *Secret Moments* (2005). The process that led to this film began over ten years ago when I was given a videotape from the USA. It was a travel guide for sex tourists. It openly gave advice on how and where to get women in Southeast Asia for as little money as possible. I was horrified. Not because I had anything against sex tourism, I hadn't yet formed an opinion about it, but because the film lacked any emotions. It's all about business. Sex for money, or as Michel Houellebecq describes in his novel *Platform*: about a barter trade from which all participants profit. But my inner aversion to the Sextravel video had to do above all with the fact that I am an incorrigible romantic, and the video lacked any romance...

CJ: This videotape is now quoted in your new movie, as "Found Footage"...

SG: The video alone would not have been enough for me as a film theme. Nevertheless, I felt that there was something that fascinated me, something that I had to get to the bottom of. I wanted to find out who shot the Sextravel video.

CJ: In the film, the trigger for your search is presented in such a way that you are looking for your Thai ex-girlfriend...

SG: It was different in the genesis of my film story. The search for the girl is a strand that I developed later. The film as it presents itself today is a long development process and it consists of different action sequences. I haven't always followed them in the chronology of today's film. So I started looking for the creator of the Sextravel video. I thought that would be easy. I found the address of the distributor in New York. But the company went bankrupt and I couldn't find anyone who knew anything about the filmmaker. It wasn't until 2009 that I had a lead again and travelled to Cambodia for the first time.

CJ: Why Cambodia?

SG: In an internet forum for sex tourists someone had responded to an advertisement I had posted and written that he believed that the creator of the Sextravel video now lives in Southeast Asia.

CJ: So you didn't have a script back then?

SG: That's right. Still, I pretended to have one. I put together a crew, bought a camera and so on. Then, just a few hours after my arrival in Asia, we had a "production session". People wanted to see a script and know what was going on...

CJ: How did you save yourself?

SG: Already on the plane I got scared. I read Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* again during the flight. The story has always fascinated me and I had long planned one day to use Conrad's structure for my own story. For this reason I had Werner Herzog's *Aguire*, still in Switzerland. The Wrath of God and Francis Ford Coppolas *Apocalypse Now* again. Both films were inspired by Conrad's novel. On my laptop I sketched a story during the flight. Like the novel character Marlow in Conrad's novel, I would drive up the river, not the Congo, as in *Heart of Darkness*, but the Mekong. Looking for the creator of the Sextravel video.

CJ: You wanted to tell about your first production session...

SG: I used the text I wrote on the plane as a template. We started with a bar in the red light district Victory Hill in Sihanoukville in Cambodia.

CJ: How did you get this bar?

SG: The blogger who had responded to one of my ads lived in Sihanoukville and had contacted me from that bar. But the fact that we came across clues in the first bar is more like a miracle. Oscar, the Canadian bar owner, remembered the film producer. So I heard his name for the first time: He called himself Roman Guy.

CJ: Sounds like a pseudonym.

SG: I didn't know that back then, but I did. He had derived the name from "The roaming Guy". He obviously saw himself as a roaming, searching guy. Oscar also told us that Roman Guy had a girlfriend who assisted him with his videos. The idea arose that I could portray my ex-girlfriend Malee as a mutual friend in my film. You must know that as a young man I lived in Southeast Asia for the first time in 1987. At that time I fell in love with the young Thai Malee and we had a relationship that ended with my return to Switzerland. When the idea for this storyline was found, suddenly the whole story was there and the dramaturgy was compelling: I would search for our ex-girlfriend Malee via Roman Guy.

CJ: Did you get any hints about Malee, your ex-girlfriend, back then?

SG: No, we didn't start looking for her until a year later.

CJ: So *Fire Fire Desire* is about the search for Roman Guy?

SG: Yes, that's so. And that's where the story of Joseph Conrad comes in. In the year 1899, when Conrad wrote *Heart of Darkness*, there were still many so-called white places on the map of the world, i.e. regions where no white man had ever set foot. Marlow's journey was

not only a metaphor, but a real journey into the unknown. In the age of Google Earth, we can no longer imagine this; every square centimeter is explored, captured, photographed. Conrad's story is about the search for Colonel Kurtz, who disappeared from the scene for inexplicable reasons. Marlow is assigned to Kurtz to find him. The clients are concerned about financial interests, the "hunter" Marlow soon no longer. In my film this is formulated by an expat: "He knows something I don't know, so you have to find him, to find out what it is". *Apocalypse Now* is also ultimately about the same thing; we suspect or hope to find someone who knows more than we do, the white areas on the map as a metaphor. As in the film *Stalker* by Russian director Andrei Tarkovsky. In his film it's an area he calls "the zone" that you're not allowed to enter.

CJ: The tree of knowledge.

SG: The picture from the Bible has always fascinated me. Also that it is forbidden to eat from the fruits of this tree. And, how could it be otherwise: the tree stands in the middle of paradise. The theologians offer different interpretations: the sexual, the ethical, the intellectual, the developmental-psychological and the emancipatory interpretation. If you look at my films, you will know which interpretation I am most interested in...

CJ: ... for the sexual...

SG: Right. Because I think that actually most of the problems in the life of the People have to do with it and above all with the most different expectations and points of view, which are connected with it. Back to my new film: I want to experience something I don't know yet. I want to see something I've never seen before. To stay with the biblical image: I want to find the man in paradise who has eaten the forbidden fruit. In my film he is called Roman Guy. From this point on, our film work really gets going: we research at full speed, always with the camera running, of course.

CJ: You could say that you wrote your script with the camera running...

SG: Yes. The reality is my prompting lock. But reality is a very complex entity and the prompting lock is sometimes wrong, slips in the line or even lies. Reality also has a different dramaturgy than we can use in our film narrative. This is where my work begins: I direct my attention in a certain direction, sorting, selecting and, where necessary, manipulating. An exciting creative process in which I want the audience to participate.

CJ: Are you filming your life? An autobiography?

SG: If it comes across that way for the audience, I have achieved my goal.

CJ: Isn't it like that?

SG: No and ten times no. The story of the film is fiction. Everything brought about by me! My life is not so interesting and important that it would have to be filmed! But my concern is. The production process, i.e. recording technique and editing are documentary. By that I mean the aesthetics of the film. I can explain that in more detail: In the beginning there is a theme

that never lets me go. The trigger in this case was the Sextravel video from the 1990s that I received. This video is real and is partly quoted in my film. As a young man I also had a Thai girlfriend whom I had lost sight of and whose whereabouts I did not know. Besides there is naturally a Macher of the Sextravel video. All western expats appearing in the film and the Asian women, their biographies, life situations and views are also real. My job was to bring all this together and condense it into one film story.

The topics we wanted to investigate and document are the search for Roman Guy, the creator of the Sextravel video from the 1990s and the search for Malee, my ex-girlfriend from 1987. In addition, expats of western men who emigrated to Southeast Asia and may have known Roman Guy or Malee were to be found and portrayed. I was also interested in Asian women who were attracted to Western men or confronted with them for other reasons. We wanted to examine the interdependence between the expats and the Asian women, whose different needs and cultures clash here and the problems that arise from it. Many of these elements originally had nothing to do with each other. Subtopics were also hidden, of which I could know nothing at first. These motifs were brought to me by our protagonists in the course of the shooting. These are extremely important elements for the film. An expat sells me video footage taken by someone with a hidden camera in the 1990s in the brothels of Cambodia. Or: The Vietnamese life partner of an American expat gives me a drawing of women jumping over a fire. The woman can hardly read and write, but she paints beautiful pictures. The ritual of jumping over the fire of prostitutes in Cambodia during the UNTAC period became a central element in my film, one can almost say to the leitmotif.

CJ: Fire Fire Desire...

SG: Exactly. I owe the title indirectly to the draughtswoman. The women speak this rhyme when they hold hands and jump around a fire. As with Rumpelstiltskin: Oh how good that nobody knows... The implications of the ritual are enormous. In *The Golden Bough* by James Frazer, for example, you can read a lot about it. This metaphor is central to my film. But back to the start of shooting: I needed a film story or at least the "abstract" of a story, something I could tell my employees in a nutshell to make the task clear. I had thought up the following film story: Like the Conrad figure Marlow, I follow the river far to the north of Cambodia. I am looking for Roman Guy with the intention to find my and his ex-girlfriend Malee. This is fiction. During the preparation, however, I assumed that there were thousands, if not tens of thousands, of "Malees", i.e. about 40-year-old Asian women who had been abandoned by a Westerner. What we have done now: I meet so-called expats, i.e. Westerners, who were also there at the time when Roman Guy had lived in Southeast Asia according to my personal story. Already one of the first remembers him. From this starting point it was easy to find more expats who knew Roman Guy. They all describe him from their personal memories and show different, sometimes contradictory facets of Guy.

CJ: Have you found the real novel Guy?

SG: Yes, we found him. But when I finally faced him, I quickly realized that he wasn't "my novel Guy". During the process, our fictional character had evolved completely differently. We couldn't possibly fill him with the "original".

CJ: Did you keep looking for the real Malee?

SG: Yes, of course.

CJ: And? Did you find it?

SG: We did. However, I never expected that this would happen. Without an address or more precise information this would be an impossible undertaking, I thought. She could also be dead or living somewhere in the world under a different name.

CJ: How did you find her?

SG: I'd have to go back longer... I thought I remembered the name of the village where Malee grew up. The village is near Surin. I sent someone with a photograph of the 16-year-old Malee. The person went to this village and showed the picture to the inhabitants. An aunt recognized Malee and called her in Bangkok, where she was visiting her daughter, and told her about the strange incident. Malee then called the number of our production company in Bangkok, which we had distributed in the village... In Southeast Asia it is very important for the people to save face. Even if everyone knows that one thing behaves one way or the other, if it violates the social norms, everyone plays along. That was the problem with the real Malee. Today she lives on a farm outside Surin and has two daughters who study in Bangkok. In my film she should have talked about her past. All the world would have known that she had worked as a bar girl on the infamous Soy Cowboy after our relationship in the Bar Suzy Wong, including her husband and children. They know that even without "Coming-out" in my movie, but we don't talk about it.

CJ: How did she react to the reunion and your offer?

SG: She was very happy to see us again. She made the long bus trip from Surin to Bangkok to meet me. For me it was a special experience to meet the now mature Malee. Everything girlish from then was of course gone...

CJ: ...the spell too?

SG: Yes, the spell too. I'm sure it was mutual. She refused my offer to take part in the film. For the reasons I have already explained. But we had a long conversation, which we recorded and transcribed. It served as a basis for the Malee Dialogue.

CJ: Who plays the female main character Malee?

SG: We were looking for Malee. Specifically, we looked for three times. A young 17-year-old, a 40-year-old and my real girlfriend from back then. For the young and today's Malee we held several castings during four years in Bangkok and met more than 100 women. We were often close to despair and thought about giving up. I had very clear ideas about the young Malee: Only the appearance was important, she had to have an enormous canvas presence. Everyone who would see the film should fall in love with her. Only in this way would it be possible to understand my motivation to meet her again after

all these years. When our casting agent Noiyy Pasiri introduced the girl Natacha Oracha - no, that's not an artist's name - I immediately realized: That's her. But as I said, it took years. With the older Malee, we had different criteria: Apart from English, biography was the most important thing for us. It was imperative that this had to agree with the original, i.e. the real Malee, to a large extent. I wasn't personally present at all castings and after a particularly frustrating casting week in Bangkok my producer in Switzerland had called me and complained about his hardships. I advised him to forget about it today and go for a beer. Whatever he did afterwards, in a street bar near the Nana station. There he came across the owner of the bar, Jasmin Rueangchan. He thought that she might be suitable for the role and invited her to the casting. Jasmin was used to being hit on daily by foreigners and just laughed at the offer. It took a lot of convincing to get her to come to the studio the next day. Directly after the casting my producer sent me the files of the test recordings and I called back immediately. We had found them. Jasmine means "Malee" in Thai. That was a good omen... Also the biographies of the two have similarities.

CJ: How and why did you choose the American actor Geoffrey Giuliano?

SG: We wanted someone who had been living in Southeast Asia for a long time, a real expat and not an actor from Hollywood. Geoffrey found out about our project on the Internet and wrote: "I am Roman Guy". We then heard that it was impossible to work with him. On the Internet, there are downright warnings about him. We sent him the script or his 15-minute monologue and my producer visited him the next day in Pattaya, where he lives. He already gave a convincing performance at the first test. We have thrown all warnings into the wind and hired him. Then we brought him into the Cambodian jungle and put him in "his" brothel. It was hell!

CJ: You have already gained experience with Klaus Kinski...

SG: Kinski was a Sunday student compared to Giuliano. He wanted to murder me, for example. He threw me on my bed from a distance of 5 meters across the hotel room and then attacked me. He screamed so loud that the security people from the hotel stormed into the room and freed me from his clutches. I had to endure all this. On the set, however, it went against all expectations professionally. As soon as the camera was running, he was transformed: You soon noticed that he had the format of the great character actors like Kinski, Brando or Nicholson. The psychogram was right: he is Roman Guy. Giuliano is a genius. No doubt about it. He didn't promise too much. The role was written especially for him. He didn't have to pretend.

CJ: Would you work with him again on a new project?

SG: I've asked myself that before. My producer says no. He wouldn't want to work for me if Giuliano was involved. Without my producer I am lost, so the decision is clear. On the other hand, I honestly have to admit that sometimes I also notice Giuliano's peculiarities in me. Normal people can't do something like that. This way of making films requires a certain amount of madness and madness. Giuliano and I are soul mates in a way, I, from the Zurich educated middle class, in the compelling way and he in the Sicilian way... Had I had Sicilian ancestors and had I grown up in the slums of New York, I might have developed similarly. He

writes daily that he wants to make a new film with me. I am convinced that together we could ascend to undreamt-of heights. But: am I psychologically and physically able to do that?

CJ: Many other expats who are not professional actors are involved in your film. What is their role?

SG: The expats have two functions: First, many of them knew the real Roman Guy and help me find him. Second, they stand for what I could have become if I had decided to live with Malee and stayed in Southeast Asia. Most of the men depicted are my age and a little older. For the first time I consciously take part in conversations with older men. By "conscious" I mean watching them through the telephoto lens, listening to them with amplified microphones. This will be a completely new and exciting experience for me. In the evening after the interviews I look in the mirror and see myself completely new. I ask myself questions like: What distinguishes me from these men?

CJ: What distinguishes you?

SG: The film, or rather the fact that I had to deal with older men, definitely triggered something in me, set a kind of psychoanalytic process in motion. I differentiate myself in the fact that I am not judging, but only factually, in the fact that I am constantly confronted with something new and that I am interested in it, even have to be interested in it. Many of our expats have finished their former lives, they are only interested in their primary needs, the here and now. Despite these differences, however, we have something in common, and this was the first time I noticed this during my film work: we only have 10 to 15 years left to live! Imagine that. That's a damn short time when you see, for example, that I need more than 5 years for a film! "The Horror, the horror", are Colonel Kurtz's last words in *Heart of Darkness*. Now and then I also have to deal with young people in order not to think about them all the time...

CJ: Street vendor Kia, 14 years old when you first interviewed her for the film. Is Kia a kind of counterpool to the expats?

SG: I first met Kia in 2009 when we started the film. In the old town of Phnom Penh in the so-called Lake Side District, which unfortunately doesn't exist anymore, the 14-year-old girl who was 14 at the time came up to me with a hawker's tray and asked me: "Do you wanna buy a book, Sir?". I bought some books from her. She had books about the Pol Pot regime that I didn't know yet. Then we met her almost every day in the streets of Phnom Penh. One day I asked her if we could film her home. I asked her to ask her mother. My producer asked me: What does Kia's life have to do with our film? I didn't have a plausible answer. I didn't know then either that my filmic search would extend over the next five years. And that Kia would become so important for the film. We then portrayed her difficult life in the streets of Phnom Penh for the first time. In the following years we met and filmed Kia again and again how she turned from a young girl into a woman. Probably I had expected that she would take the "normal" way and how many of the women we portrayed would end up in a brothel. I was wrong and that makes me very happy. Things are seldom as they seem... Today I can answer the question of my producer at that time: The events around our film work, which were not so important at first sight, gained more and more weight, without them the film would lack the

flesh. We would only have the skeleton of the actually very linear story. Besides Kia, there are other storylines that have nothing to do with the primary plot (the search for Roman Guy and Malee). I explain this as follows: The dramaturgical structure of my film is like a tree. A fir tree. The roots are the idea, the trunk the actual story and the branches are just these "subplots". It's interesting that in the course of our work a few of these branches also touched in the wind. Subplots have been induced. For example, protagonists met and their lives developed differently due to the film work. And: A tree is no tree without branches.

CJ: How has your relationship with Southeast Asia developed and what are the biggest changes in the 25 years since you last came here?

SG: In 1987 Marguerite Duras brought me to Southeast Asia; her literature, of course. *L'Amant*, the story of her youth in what was then Indochine. And also Graham Greene with *The Quiet American*. At that time in the 1980s, the stories of these authors were still very close, visually and culturally. The colonial era was still omnipresent: with a little imagination it came to life, at night after a rain in Phnom Penh, when the streets were wet and a lonely rickshaw rider was cycling in the sparse light. With colonial architecture as the backdrop, the sounds, such as this melancholic bamboo xylophone music, which the wind blows from far away over the Mekong and of course the smells, jasmine, the scent of foreign spices... That was Southeast Asia. At that time there were still isolated opium dens, just like Graham Green. And the girls were different, too... But as one of my protagonists says: "When you realize these differences, you know that you are old now". Now the changes in Phnom Penh are striking: every year, when we came back to the city, we couldn't believe our eyes; skyscrapers shooting out of the ground, whole lakes were removed...

CJ: You are speaking of Lake Boeung Kak in Phnom Penh...

SG: Exactly. In 2009 we filmed Kia, who lived with her family far out on the lake in a traditional stilt house. Two years later I saw her mother under a crowd of displaced persons in Barbara Lüthy's 10vor10 report. The rapid changes in Southeast Asia are very visible, the changes in society noticeable.

CJ: How are social changes manifesting themselves?

SG: We shot our film mainly in Cambodia and Thailand and the cultures of these countries are probably even more different than the cultures of Sweden and Sicily. Thailand is a first-world country in purely visual terms. Bangkok is a high-tech city today. When I first visited the city in 1987, 1.5 million people lived there. Today it is about 20 million. The urbanization trend began in Thailand much earlier than in Cambodia. This is due to historical reasons: In Cambodia, almost two million people were killed in genocide from 1975 to the 1990s. Anyone who had a job, could read and write, wore glasses was first tortured and then murdered. Only the uneducated farmers survived. When the UNTAC, which controlled the country from 1991, withdrew in 1993, it left behind not only a completely mined and destroyed country, but also a destroyed culture. It will be many generations before this damage is repaired.

Phnom Penh is a small town compared to Bangkok. It is, as I mentioned before, being diligently built and the poor population is being driven out of the city. Thank God there are

people in Cambodia like "our" pediatrician Beat Richner, who runs two big state-of-the-art pediatric hospitals and people like Nico Mesterharm with his institution Meta House. Nico tries to rebuild the local understanding of art, music and culture with exhibitions, workshops, etc. The French also do a lot in this field with their Institut Francais and of course François Ponchaud, who is campaigning for the rights of the Cambodian rural population in view of the theft of land as a result of concessions being awarded to foreign companies.

CJ: There are countless Western NGOs...

SG: Yes unfortunately...

CJ: You are not good at talking to the NGOs in Cambodia...

SG: Through our film work we had different insights into local processes and events, which a normal tourist might not get so easily. My opinion on this topic is quite radical: You should ban NGOs and instead build new organizations established by the international community or put existing NGOs under the leadership of the UN or another controlling body. My harsh criticism does not apply to Amnesty International, Greenpeace, Médecins Sans Frontières, etc. I am talking about organizations that have two main objectives: Firstly, to earn as much money as possible into their own pockets and secondly, to impose on the local population the most conservative, Christian fundamentalist world view possible. On the first point, it is clear that all these organisations depend on donations from the First World and that it is a highly competitive market. But the fact that the donors are being lied to, for example by being led to believe that Cambodia is teeming with child prostitution and Western freedom activists, is simply fraud and causes enormous damage to the country's image. Once upon a time, but never to the extent that the media has portrayed. There were few exceptions. This problem could have been solved then with the diplomatic skill of the donor countries. Today there are hardly any prostitutes left. Definitely less than in Zurich, for example. This is thanks to the NGOs. Around the world, this is seen as a success. And the NGOs boast about it...

CJ: Isn't it a success if Asian women no longer have to sell themselves?

SG: That would have been a success if the lost income had been replaced by other sources of income. But that's not the case. There are no jobs, no alternatives. In a restaurant, the service staff earns 60 dollars a month, more than half of which is spent on food and transport. In the clothing production factories the earnings are even worse. In addition, one must never be absent, never be ill. Otherwise one loses the job on the spot. Many of these women have children who may become ill and the mothers have to be absent. The conditions are catastrophic. What the NGOs have achieved: They bear a considerable share of the blame for a new misery, a much worse one than prostitution ever was: child trafficking. Many women are forced into pregnancy, the babies are then taken away from them and sold. Many are not forced either, they do it voluntarily. They have to get money to feed their families.

CJ: You seem to be a very political person. Why don't you, for example, make a film about the social changes after the Khmer Rouge or about NGOs?

SG: Because I couldn't. I can and only want to make films about things that affect me personally. Of course, from time to time I also try to explain historical, political and cultural-historical contexts in my films. In *Passion Despair*, for example, there is an excursus on the cultural history of girl worship in literature, art, etc. and one on the splinter state of Transnistria. In *Fire Fire Desire*, for example, there are references to the Khmer Rouge.

CJ: Were you supported by Thailand and Cambodia in your film work, did the official authorities even know of your presence?

SG: In Thailand, where we worked with a local film production company, they took care of the filming permits. In some cases it didn't work, for example on the state railway and at the airport in Hua Hin. I personally made representations there and we received the appropriate permits without any problems. Thailand is world-famous for film production services. And there is everything, equipment, studios and highly trained film technicians, location hunters, casting directors etc.. The only problem is that it is no longer inexpensive. It's probably almost as expensive as in Switzerland. But it is possible to work very professionally, which is sometimes fun for me. In the scene where several girls jump over a fire that we shot in the country near Hua Hin, we had over 30 people in the team, five pyrotechnicians alone. Of course I would always like to work like this. But in Cambodia this was not possible...

CJ: Why?

SG: There are no official filming permits in Cambodia. Of course that's not quite true: If you have a lot of money and time and a script translated to Khmer, it's okay. We were offered by a government agency to organize a permit for us for US\$ 50'000. Of course, this should only be possible with a "harmless" script. Prostitution, politics, sex tourism, an absolute No-Go! So we didn't even try...

CJ: Then how could you shoot in Cambodia?

SG: I was thinking: How do you work when you have to be invisible? And how does that affect the cinematic work? The first question is quickly answered: you behave like a tourist and only film with a small amateur video camera. Then we did it like this; the whole film was shot with a Canon Mini-Handycam. If I wanted or had to, I could make the camera disappear in seconds. The second question, how the clandestine approach would affect the film, I still can't answer conclusively. It's certainly good if you don't stand out while depicting reality. You are also taken less seriously with a small camera. The film certainly profited from this. After five years of untroubled work, however, I became overconfident and we were arrested while shooting the novel Guy scene in the Cambodian jungle.

CJ: That was the shoot with Geoffrey Giuliano?

SG: That was aggravating. I wasn't just dealing with a very dangerous chief of police and his 10 men, I was also dealing with an insane actor. There was a risk that he would go after the cops.

CJ: Can you tell us more about what happened?

SG: We had built a brothel in the jungle for weeks. An incredibly romantic balcony over a river. For lack of real film lights we illuminated the whole scene with cheap Chinese construction lights. It looked gigantic. The scene couldn't have been presented more conspicuously. Everything was ready, only the girls who were supposed to play Roman Guy's harem were still missing. They gathered at a meeting point in the city where my producer picked them up by our bus in the evening. The police watched a dozen young girls get into the car with western-looking men. All they had to do was follow the car. The policemen surrounded our brothel area and then: Access. Like in a crime thriller. A cameraman from the local TV station was also there. They were convinced that they had managed a giant catch. We all had to line up one after the other and were then interrogated individually. The whole night. Film making was out of the question.

CJ: How do you feel when suddenly there is a danger that something you have built up over the years may not be finished?

SG: There is no room for such feelings at the moment of danger. My experience as a pilot probably helps me, I've been flying for over 30 years. At the moment of danger the feelings are completely switched off. You become a plane and you know crystal clear: Now I do this, then that, otherwise it's over. I knew that the police could come up with any imaginative accusation that they could get away with anything. We had no chance. And they immediately started to accuse us on the spot that we were making porn movies with the girls. Two of the girls were also minors. My God, how stupid one can only be! As we know today, I reacted instinctively and correctly. I took the boss and explained my film to him. With our translator. With all the intellectual implications, my artistic demands etc. etc. etc. I remember even using the word "Metalevel". Giuliano probably just rolled his eyes, I don't remember him... In any case, the policeman got something like scared. Or it simply became too much for him after a few hours. He probably also wanted to go home to his family. In any case, they sent us away from one minute to the next. Not without the demand for "petrol money", with the argumentation that they had lost a lot of petrol because of us and had no money to fill up with petrol and the condition that we had to arrive at the police headquarters the next day at 10 o'clock.

CJ: And how did the story end in the end?

SG: I talked on the phone that night with people who know Cambodia very well. I was advised not to go to the post the next day, but to run away. Everyone feared that we would be blackmailed. For me this was not an option, but neither was a Cambodian prison. I had to shoot in the next few days. I had worked 5 years for this scene. I had to have permission to shoot. This was the only solution. So I called the police station at 11am, deliberately an hour late, demanded the boss and told him that we would not come to the station because we were waiting for a permit from Phnom Penh. I heard him discussing my information with someone in the background. Back on the phone, he told me he would show up at my hotel in an hour. Then I knew I had won. He comes to me and not me to him. He brought a beautiful filming permit, with stamps and signatures. Then we negotiated for three hours. About the price, the "fee" for the permit. We agreed and that same evening we could start shooting.

CJ: They say they shot the whole film with an amateur camera. But you call yourself a "technofetishist". How does that work together?

SG: It doesn't work together and I won't repeat it. We had modified the camera. We tried to get a cinema gamma. We had expensive attachment lenses and great sound equipment with radio mics etc. Nevertheless, it was a compromise, which, as I said, I don't want to make any more.

CJ: You also operate the camera?

SG: I'm a cameraman, sound engineer, director, author and producer in one. A film of this size could never be made with as little money as I had at my disposal. It would also definitely not have been possible to shoot in Cambodia with a larger crew.

CJ: In your previous films you had cameramen?

SG: Yes, very famous (laughs), at least they are today. The reason why I do the camera today is only secondary to the money. If I had a bigger budget for a film, I would want to make the camera myself. The camera is the film. I am the camera. I am the film. I was never happy with my cameramen. Personally, they were and are wonderful people. They are also technically far superior to me. And above all they have routine, which I unfortunately don't have. But - and there comes a big "but": Only I know my film. I have the sleepless nights. I convince people to take part in my film. People who never wanted to be in a movie. Policemen who would have liked to have arrested me. And with this obsession that it takes to go through such an undertaking, I also make the camera. I constantly break the rules. For example, I say to my protagonists: "Look into the camera when you talk to me". Or when they walk out of the light, I don't turn off the camera, but run after them, into a corner where there may be no light. That looks terrible, no cameraman wants to live with that.

CJ: Nevertheless, I am thrilled by your camera work! You are very close to it, and even in the background, actions relevant to the story happen more often.

SG: Thanks for the compliment. As mentioned elsewhere: I see myself as a cameraman and photographer. I identify 100% with the job. But the camera would be even better if I didn't also have to pay attention to things like unwanted wind noise or give stage directions. I try to create my own style. And that includes the background direction you mentioned. In the "real" film, i.e. in the big expensive feature film productions, there are so-called background directors. In other words, people who deal exclusively with background sequences. Although I can't always directly influence the background by staging something, I try to see the background as more than just a backdrop. I do this primarily by choosing the location and the location of the camera within the location. An example: I filmed the protagonist Jessica in front of a Hindu penis shrine, a religious place where hundreds of penis sculptures of all sizes are set up. I knew that Jessica would talk about her sex addiction. The sight of erect pharynx literally put her in ecstasy. She bubbled like a waterfall during the two-hour interview. In addition I already noticed during the preliminary inspections of the plant that behind the penis temple a channel with a lot of boat traffic ran and the boats when turning sometimes ejected high water fountains. That was my background for the Jessica scene.

CJ: I see that the locations were carefully chosen.

SG: In a normal TV production this would of course not be possible, there would be no time. Of course, they also have a different claim. My claim was to tell a very complex story, and not just at the dialogue or interview level. I had to bring in the local culture. We spent a lot of time to achieve this. Almost every scene is staged like the penis temple scene. The scene with the American ex-soldier Dan, in the Cambodian shooting range, the scene with Dieter in the bodybuilding studio or the protagonist George in front of a waving cloth on which he has copied a chapter from Nabokov's novel *Lolita* with a felt-tip pen. These are all very important pictures and, as you know, it took years to complete the film. This care, this meticulousness will not necessarily be consciously perceived by the average moviegoer. That is already clear to me. Emotionally, however, it will contribute to the whole and, if I am lucky, tell my story.

CJ: You told me that you edited almost 2000 hours.

SG: Yes, the editing room became my second home... in the two previous films I edited even longer, also in the unpublished *Passion Despair*, I must not think about it, it makes me dizzy... This film went relatively fast because I now have a cutter. Our film is made at the editing table. Most of the fiction, to come back to our initial theme, is created here. Here we create a new reality. I can't say that I really love this work. The whole thing is terribly lonely and when I think about how many years of my life I have spent in these darkened rooms, it makes me dizzy again. This film brings together over 60 hours of original material.

CJ: I was just about to get to the length of the finished film...

SG: At the moment it is 180 minutes long. It could also be 240 minutes long. We have so much good, interesting and cut material. Now that it's about the cinema exploitation of the film, we have to think about a shorter version...
125 minutes? It won't be possible under that.

CJ: Two films?

SG: They laugh, but that's what we thought. Like Lars von Trier's *Nymphomaniac*, Part 1 and Part 2. What's wrong with that: You could interpret this as a pomposity and it would distract me from my real concern. I'm not Lars von Trier (laughs)... even though I find his films enormously inspiring. He is also a "Personal Filmer"...

CJ: The question of budget, costs and finances. Who paid for all this and what did the film cost?

SG: Unfortunately, we haven't been able to get a cent of funding so far. None of the usual jobs such as foundations, television stations, etc. help us in any other way. The problem is that with my special way of making films, there is no script. I would even go so far as to say that even a concept, a publicly made one, to be exact (we produce tons of paper for our own use), would limit me.

I "write" with my camera running. Nobody wants to take such a "risk", I say this in quotation marks. This film was pre-financed by me and with the front work of dozens of people. The hope now is that we will regain this money. There was no initial budget. We have made a new budget every year, so there are 5 budgets and also 5 accounts. I could calculate the total costs if I could find the time. In addition there are my tens of thousands of hours of front-line work. I suppose the so-called "production value", according to Swiss industry approaches, would amount to about 700,000 francs.

CJ: The standard question: Do you have a new project?

SG: Of course. In my work and the way I live, new questions always arise, new white spots on the map. The world is also becoming more and more politically correct, you have to do something about that!

CJ: Can you tell us anything yet?

SG: There are various projects, for example *Dark Stream*, this film would also be set in Southeast Asia. Another story I would like to settle in Italy is called *Night Shots*. But probably I will do a project with the working title *River of Destiny*, first, a "Personal Film"! This film is about coincidences, fateful connections, "self-fulfilling prophecies", "synchronicity" (a term of C.G. Jung). The film takes place in Cameroon and Brazil.

CJ: Thank you for the interview.