

BIOGRAPHY

Born in Baghdad, Iraq in 1955; has lived in Switzerland since 1961.

1970s training in design and typography; odd jobs; travels in the Middle East.

1976–1981: on-the-job training in film production.

Since 1982: freelance cameraman and director for film and TV.

1980s: co-founds the Megaherz, Videoladen and Dschoint Ventschr video collectives in Zurich.

1994: with Werner Schweizer, restructures Dschoint Ventschr as a production company specializing in innovative works and new directors; in 1997 the two receive the Zurich Film Prize for their support of young talent.

2001–02: hosts the popular "ch:filmclub" talk show on Swiss-German TV (SF DRS). Alongside his work as filmmaker and producer, Samir is also active in theatre and installation arts.

SAMIR



Setting the Images Free

In a 1993 interview with the journalist Michael Sennhauser Samir said, "I hope that my knowledge of Europe and the Middle East will prove fruitful for my future as a filmmaker. This knowledge cannot be divided into two – even if that's precisely what certain quarters seem to believe." If anyone knows that things cannot simply be divided into two opposing categories, it is Samir. The son of a Swiss-German mother and an Iraqi Communist father has spent his life bringing together elements that others might have thought could not be mixed: Arab and European culture, fiction and documentary, film and video, semiotic theory and police thrillers. Samir is one of the most versatile filmmakers active in Switzerland today. His work ranges from experimental video, through documentary and feature films, to television dramas and museum installations. He is equally at home as a TV talk-show host or lecturer in media theory. Navigating between places, identities and cultures is also a longstanding theme in his films. From the multicultural character Max alias Massimo Huber in his early fiction feature **Filou** (1988) to the real-life Karma Lobsang – the daughter of Tibetan immigrants who became a scholar of the ancient Swiss language Rhaeto-Romanic – in **Tibet in the Engadine** (1998), Samir's protagonists live out their multiple identities in ways that defy clichés and preconceived ideas.

Samir's unconventional approach is also evident in his use of film form. Over the years he has consistently combined cinema, video and computer technology. Today many filmmakers use video as a cheap substitute for film. But Samir understood early on that video – and later digital media – when combined with film, would allow him to create multilayered sound and image compositions which would perfectly parallel the theme of hybridity in his work. His 1993 documentary **Babylon 2** uses the device of the layered and subdivided frame to portray the realities of being a "Secondo" (second-generation immigrant) in Switzerland in the electronic age. In its development of a new visual style and its treatment of a highly relevant but largely neglected topic, **Babylon 2** remains one of the most influential documentaries of recent Swiss film history. Samir created a similar aesthetic in his 2002 documentary **Forget Baghdad**, which explored the paradoxical situation of Jewish Iraqi Communists forced to emigrate to Israel. The impossibility of easily reconciling their religious, political and national identities is mirrored by the composition of the images, in which – thanks to split-screen and digital image layering – there are always several different things happening at once.

In Samir's work, the serious and the playful exist side by side.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marcy Goldberg is Canadian and has been living in Zurich since 1996. She has worked as a production assistant, documentary researcher, journalist, consultant, film programmer, university lecturer and translator. She is currently writing a dissertation on contemporary Swiss film and video.

**SAMIR****> Setting the Images Free**

In Samir's work, the serious and the playful exist side by side. Perhaps the most telling example is **La Eta Knabino**, a 6-minute "digital silent film fable" shot and edited in the style of early cinema, but using cutting-edge computer technology to process the images. The film's exaggerated comic style contains a serious message: the importance of solidarity. And fittingly, the intertitles are in Esperanto, the hybrid language invented in the late 19th century for the utopian purpose of creating universal understanding.

As a citizen of the 21st century, Samir knows that such utopian dreams can only be treated with a certain irony. But he also knows that they must not be forgotten. In his essay "The Liberation of the Frame" (see below) he explains how the use of digital images brings filmmakers back to an original dream of art: "the free transformation of reality through subjective perception". And he argues that this allows "the manipulation of the image by technical means" to bring documentary filmmakers closer to – and not farther away from – the realities they hope to represent, precisely because those means offer them more freedom in creating their representations. It's a paradoxical idea. But coming from Samir, that's no surprise.

Marcy Goldberg, 2003

- 2002** **Forget Baghdad**, documentary, 35mm, 110 min. Best Film, Semaine de la critique, Locarno Film Festival (2002) Zurich Film Prize (2002)
- 1999** **Die Jagd nach dem Tod** (PRO7) TV thriller, 90 min
- 1998** **Projecziuns tibetanas** (Tibet in the Engadine) TV documentary, 24 min
- 1997** **La eta knabino** (The Little Girl) experimental film, 35mm, 6 min
Angelique, fiction, 35mm, 12 min (for "Blind Date" TV series) Swiss Film Prize for best short (1998)
- 1996** **Tödliche Schwesternliebe** (PRO7), TV drama, 90 min
Die Metzger (ZDF) TV comedy, 90 min
- 1995** **Die Partner** (ARD) TV crime series, 6 x 47 min
- 1994** **Eurocops** (ZDF, SF DRS, ORF) TV series, 2 x 50 min
- 1993** **Babylon 2**, documentary, 35mm, 90 min. Zurich Film Prize; Quality Award, Swiss Federal Office of Culture
- 1991** **Immer & ewig** (always & forever) experimental fiction, video, 90 min. Award for innovative film, Solothurn; Quality Award, Swiss Federal Office of Culture
- 1988** **Filou** fiction feature, 35mm, 90 min
- 1987** **Martin Disler**, TV documentary, 37 min
- 1986** **Morlove** experimental feature, video, 71 min. Quality Award, Swiss Federal Office of Culture
- 1985** **Schiefkörper** experimental video, 9 min
- 1983** **Stummfilm** fiction, 16mm, 18 min
- 1981** **Semiotik einer Heimat** (Semiotics of a Native Land) documentary video, 40 min

Samir

LIBERATION OF THE FRAME

From Sony to Panasonic, from Avid to Quantel – high-tech companies are turning somersaults to sing the praises of their latest programs and machines for digital image processing. Interestingly enough, no one speaks of the artistic possibilities offered by such technological innovations. But filmmakers sense that we stand on the threshold of a new age, one in which we will see a huge explosion in the formal aspects of cinematic language. Many of these formal innovations are already well-known, because they have roots in the cinematic past. But thanks to digitization, they will become directly available to a much broader group of auteurs and producers. Simpler access to equipment is the start of a cultural revolution in cinematography.

But for many filmmakers – in particular documentarists – the alteration of images by technical means is still anathema. To be sure, they acknowledge that the very presence of a camera changes the behaviour of the subject, and that the filmic reproduction therefore no longer corresponds "in full" to the original reality. Yet most of them reject the next step, the manipulation of the image by technical means.

In this connection it is important to recall that the idea of the real and above all "true" or "unmanipulated" image is a mere 150 years old, and can be dated from the early days of photography. Then, too, it is often forgotten that the history of film, as of photography, is nothing but an uninterrupted evolution of the possibilities of image manipulation. The clever forgeries of meetings between Russian and Chinese revolutionary leaders in the twenties and thirties by means of photo retouching are only one example of this.

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People became aware of the forgeries not because the retouching was clumsy, but because somebody remembered the original photos – or was present at the actual event.

In many Third World countries there are still artists calling themselves portrait photographers who are, in reality, rearrangers of reality: by means of light modelling, staging and plain hard work in scratching and painting away at the negatives.

People who have their pictures taken by these photographers are aware that they will be "enhanced", that is, they accept that they are not going to get a "true" image of themselves. The portrait is put in a pretty gold frame and hung in the living room. Some day it would be interesting to have a talk about "truth" and "reality" in this context.

With regard to resolution and texture, the digital image today is no longer to be distinguished from the photomechanical image. Until now the simple photographic reproduction of reality was seen as "true". If, now, such a belief is dispelled because of digitization, this means nothing less than the return to the origins of art: the free transformation of reality through subjective perception.

2003 **White Elephant on a Flying Carpet**, 4-channel video installation for the "Ex-Oriente" exhibition, Aachen

2000 **Norman Plays Golf**
Multimedia play, Theaterhaus Gessnerallee, Zurich

1999 **(It was) just a job**, 4-channel video installation, Zentrum für Kunst und Medien, Karlsruhe

1996 **The Social Life of Roses**
Video installation (with Pipilotti Rist), Kunsthalle Baden-Baden, Kunstmuseum Solothurn

1992 **Still Motion**, Video/computer installation, Zurich

1983 **Majakowski kommt**, performance with music, Zurich

Samir

LIBERATION OF THE FRAME



Like the revolution in painting at the turn of the century, the further development of the cinematic idiom will naturally cause friction between innovative filmmakers and the public. This despite the fact that the formal resources have long since been available, indeed, were already developed in the first 20 years of cinematic history.

A good example of this is Méliés' "A Trip to the Moon", which constructs an independent filmic world using a marvellous combination of technical tricks like masks, mattes, scale models, stop-motion and superimposing. Contemporary audiences were enchanted. With the aid of such methods Méliés created a "true illusion" and made the viewers forget its artificiality.

Today most audiences are bored by the old silent films – usually because of the lack of sound, the black-and-white pictures and the slow-paced montage. Over the last hundred years, people's perceptions have undergone a drastic change.

What is really new in digitization is direct access to the various formal tricks.

Expectations with regard to the texture of the cinematic image now run very high – and this is precisely what ultimately led to the dissolution and reconstitution of the image using digital means. Paradoxically, the creation of an artificial world has only one purpose: to make the artifice look "true" and thus allow it to appear as "real" in one's subjective perception.

But the dialectical process of image perception and image production is another subject altogether.

Back to the triumphal march of digitization in film. It is based upon the preceding video revolution in the electronic processing of analog images, which was mainly used in television. Chromakey, split screen, captions and titles, colour manipulation down to the vector level – by now every viewer has grown accustomed to these formal tools. Simultaneously there arose a new generation of filmmakers who learned how to use them. Presumably most of them are not even aware that in the long history of film all the creative effects they use with video had already been employed in photomechanical processes.

So all that remains to digital image processing in the way of new creative tools is stretching and morphing: techniques for manipulating time and shape that were themselves adopted from camera technique (speed control) and cartoons (animation).

What is really new in digitization, therefore, is direct access to the various formal tricks. This ability to freely manipulate images really ought to inspire filmmakers to break the one remaining taboo: the rigid frame of the screen.

Babylon 2, my documentary film from 1994, was an attempt to do just that. It is a cinematic reflection on the topics of suburbs – mass emigration – identity – electronic communica-

Samir

LIBERATION OF THE FRAME

tions – music and much more. It is in the broadest sense a survey of the present from the standpoint of second-generation foreigners in Switzerland.

The subject matter having been set, the difficulty lay in mastering it, because it encompassed so many diverse fields. The question was how to do justice to the content in the formal realization. The visual material covered every possible medium of the last hundred years: from photocopies to Super 8, from video interviews to black-and-white archive material from the newsreels.

For the first time in a documentary, all these different media were read into a high-resolution digital editing system, cut, processed and finally transferred back to 35mm.

This allowed us to freely utilize the blank surface of the screen. The idea was to give each medium its own on-screen form. As the basic format we chose a screen size of 1:1.66. This format was used for all staged sequences with symbolic character, shot in Super 16. Interviews shot in Beta SP appeared on the right side of the image for reasons of better visibility – and thus of structural hierarchy. This rigid window was opened by flowing over into the black background. That gave us the option of allowing other images to appear in the background, providing additional information about the main image.

Along the time axis, little Super 8 vignettes structured the film and appeared as stop-motion scenes between the individual chapters on the left side of the screen.

The names of the actors, the subtitles and individual key words are treated as independent artistic elements.

The main difficulty was to synchronize the foreground rhythm with the background. Each additional creative element (title, image, sound, music) not only changed the relationship between the images within the projection frame, but also the perceptions along the time axis.

We wanted to prevent the audience from getting lost in a barrage of effects. It was our hope that, as in music, the audience would be able to pick out on screen those details that are most appealing, without losing sight of the wood for the trees.

The possibilities of digitized image processing helped us create a film that, hitherto, had not been possible in this form.

Samir, Sept. 1998