

## Books



## Architecture and cinema

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L'architecture du cinéma.

Hans Schmidt, architecte / Agbar

Véronique Goël, testi di Jacques Gubler, Luca Ortelli,

François Bovier e Véronique Goël con Olivier Lugon,

Métis Presses, Genève 2008 (pp. 128, s.i.p.)

"Multimediality" is one of the buzz-words in contemporary culture. It can be made to mean just about anything, but it can also become meaningless, often simply referring to a (boring) overlapping of narrations in which the author essentially repeats the same story using different means of expression. Multimediality is far more interesting and uncommon when it turns into a multiplication of non-coincident stories, where each medium conditions the meaning of the work and each subject prompts a specific narrative medium. This is the case with *L'architecture du cinéma*, a slightly misleading title for a sum of different works (videos, photographs and words) on seemingly unrelated subjects.

It contains a DVD with three film sequences by Véronique Goël. The longest and most complex (45 minutes, 2005) is about Hans Schmidt (1893-1972), one of the core figures of the *neues Bauen* in Basel, the driving force of the ABC Gruppe, an inveterate communist, a member of Ernst May's "brigade" of architects working in the Soviet Union, and an academic in the East Berlin of the 1950s and '60s. The second video (11 minutes, 2005) is actually a sequence of 4 frozen frames of the famous (but then recently opened) AGBAR Tower by Jean Nouvel in Barcelona, with a series of texts flowing over it. The third (20 minutes, 2008) shows an interview with a 101-year-old lady, the hugely fascinating Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky (1897-2000), who led a long and adventurous life far beyond the Frankfurt Kitchen usually associated with her name. As well as the DVD, the slipcase contains a fine small-format book whose pages run parallel to the pictures. The two opening essays are on Schmidt. The first, by Jacques Gubler, is a quick and effective synthesis of his work that closely follows the way Goël's film unfolds but also introduces new impressions. The second, by Luca Ortelli, is a more analytical description of the phases in the Swiss architect's career, seen within the framework of the different cultural geographies in which he worked. These pieces do not contain anything that will unhinge current interpretations of the subject, especially those put forward by Gubler in his comments on ABC, or rather in the book edited by Ursula Suter and the only monograph on

Schmidt, published in 1993. However, they are remarkable pieces of exemplary clarity, almost didactic in the way form, language and content match. Presumably this clarity would have pleased Schmidt.

François Bovier writes about the AGBAR Tower (or rather Goël's film about it), helping to solve the riddles of what is, on first impact, a fairly alienating film. Despite the frozen images, it is clear that the real protagonists of the video are the incessant, spasmodic changes to the Barcelona cityscape, with their awful ability to alter and even erase individual and collective memories. They also take the leading role in other works by the Swiss artist, such as the film *Poble No* and the *Hotel Comercio* collection of photographs, both dated 2007. Placing the ascetic housing of the Swiss *neues Bauen* alongside the hyper-mediatised Barcelona skyline or Schütte-Lihotzky's expressive face may simply appear odd. But by the end of the viewing or reading, you realise that these materials are principally held together by the personality of the author. Véronique Goël, "a filmmaker and sculptor [who] lives and works in Geneva" (as she is over-modestly described on the back cover), is a highly complex artist who came to films from fashion passing via painting and engraving. Her discovery and portrayal of architecture and cities has shown them as places of permanent tension and conflict. \_\_

The book concludes with Olivier Lugon's interview with her, providing an essential guide to the reading and viewing. This further clarifies that Goël sees filmmaking as "a critical art" that can help to construct interpretations and opinions without limiting itself to describing merely scenes and situations in a seemingly comforting narrative continuity. In this way, her film strives to convey the symbolic and even political value of architectural or urban space. The unrelenting freeze-frames and long tracking shots, in which the camera seems to be travelling through the architecture and looking around with an almost contemplative attitude, reveal the space as an "*enjeu primordial des rapports sociaux*". So, we are offered a description of the multiple and contradictory political values of form and language by means of a documentary on Schmidt, an interview with Schütte-Lihotzky, and an experiment of video-art featuring an architectural landmark in Barcelona, alongside more traditional writings on the history and criticism of architecture and the city. Certainly far removed from ideology, but also a long way from facile simplification.