

# L'ŒIL DE LA PHOTOGRAPHIE

## What's new, Gregor Törzs ? Interview by Nadine Dinter

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Nadine Dinter

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This month, I met with an artist I have known since the 1990s. Huge fan of MTV that I was, there was no way of missing **Gregor Törzs** and his iconic ads for the legendary television channel and its revolutionary music videos, shows, and ads. Then, in the mid-2000s, Törzs was back again – becoming one of the most experimental photographers I have had the pleasure of knowing in the course of my career.

Törzs was born in Hamburg and moved to L.A. at the age of 19. While working as a camera man, he met iconic photographer Michel Comte, who hired him as his director of photography; shoots with Geraldine Chaplin, Carla Bruni, and Mimi Rogers followed. Then he was discovered by MTV and became the protagonist of its legendary ad campaign. Gregor's acting career skyrocketed, taking him back and forth between the US and Europe, living life on the high road. Around 2006, he decided to change his life completely, moved to Berlin, and devoted himself to photography.

To do a proper recap on this exciting career, I met with Törzs, talked about his highlights, what inspires him, and “what's new?”

**Nadine Dinter: You have been living and working in the creative business for over 30 years. Moving from lighting technician to director of photography, from DOP to being an actor, and from standing in front of the camera to standing behind it as a photographer. What one word would you use to describe yourself?**

**Gregor Törzs:** Evolving.

As colorful as my journey might seem, every step or profession evolved from a previous choice. I never had a precise vision of where or what I wanted to do in the future, but I always knew how I wanted to feel.

**In the 1990s, you worked with Michel Comte and became his director of photography. What are some highlights you remember from this cooperation?**

**GT:** I was 23 years old with just one short film under my belt that I shot in New York. Michel saw it and liked it so much that he hired me. At that time, he did not know so much about movie lighting. But after three years of being pushed hard by guys who won Academy Awards, I did. It was a good match, but to this day, he probably does not know that he had hired a kid!

Over a period of about two years, I worked with him on various productions. Translating his photographic visual style into film was quite a task. I remember always telling him that he takes one picture every 30 seconds, while I take 24 in one. I loved the challenge and how it pushed me into unique lighting solutions from early on.

As far as highlights, there were a few, but shooting Sophia Loren was one of the most real, surreal experiences. Sometimes when you are in the midst of things and are super-focused, it's tough to see things from the outside. But that day was truly epic. Months later, I opened the *Vogue* and could not believe my eyes. It was a double page, with a shot Michel did where I was lying on the floor at her feet, filming – not a bad place to be! My parents freaked the fuck out.

**When you were based in L.A., you seemed to have switched roles easily from cameraman to actor. Did you have time to take acting classes, or did it happen overnight? What was your first big success?**

**GT:** In 1996, I was supposed to shoot the new German MTV campaign as a DOP. Based on the idea from the ad agency, I came up with a completely new character, put on a fake beaver hat, adopted a lisp...and literally stepped in front of my own camera. That campaign became quite a thing. Knowing that on every photo or film clip, I am wearing my light meter on my belt still makes me happy.

I had no idea it would kick off my career as an actor, but when it came, I knew what to expect on the movie set. Trust me: a movie set can be mega intimidating. If you've ever felt awkward at a party, not quite connecting with the scene, always feeling you are in the way... multiply that by a thousand.

In terms of acting classes, I did start to get some coaching. My strength was that I had no fear of letting loose, but since I had no training as an actor, my weakness was remembering my lines and working around semi-well-written dialog. Nevertheless, I filled a gap and introduced a style that was new. Kind of rough, authentic, loose, and somewhat good-looking – at least my mum thinks so!

**After the peak of your career, you decided to make a radical change and reorganize your life and career. Why devote it entirely to photography?**

**GT:** One day, I was having a morning coffee on my rooftop in Los Angeles and thinking how awesome my life was. I told myself that I was truly living my dream. But all of a sudden, it hit me like an electric shock: Yes, I'm living my dream, but it is a dream I had ten years ago, and I had already been living it for five. I had no rational or intellectual explanation, but deep inside, I knew that I had to change something drastically to be happy at 40. I did not know what it was, so I decided to change everything. Reset and let go and follow where it would take me. Today, I know that it was the subconscious knowledge that I was on a path that would not let me develop to my full potential.

**Around 2006, you bought an old box camera at the flea market. Tell us about launching your life as a photographer.**

**GT:** I was in Berlin at a camera flea market and saw this little Bakelite box camera. A Bilora Boy. Maybe it sounds weird, but she talked to me, jumped straight into my heart.

I loaded her up and never took a single photo. Not until one day, when I was at the Natural History Museum in New York. That day my hand reached for her, and I went with the moment.

When I had the film developed, the entire contact sheet was black and underexposed. Except for one image: a stag with his enormous antlers. There it was: I found my white, my black, and the emotion I had been looking for. Seeing that picture made me realize that it was all worth it. I had made the right decision to follow my heart without being clever about it. Though it risks sounding corny, I knew this was the ticket to start the rest of my life.

**After the first series, you embarked on another new adventure and built your own underwater camera. What made you create such a beast, and what makes the underwater world so appealing to you?**

**GT:** After the first series, I had the Bilora Boy shipped to the US to have a custom underwater housing built for her. I thought she would like to go somewhere she was never meant to be. And she sure did love it. Shooting another few years with her, I always had the feeling that I had left some kind of emotion behind, something that I never quite captured. It wasn't the camera's fault. She was amazing, and neither was I to blame. It was a feeling that needed a technical solution. I wanted to recreate the moment when you see something for the first time. Something that makes you stop and hold on. A moment that almost feels like an emotional vacuum. Underwater photography is tricky, and I try to make it short and painless. Most underwater photography is done with land cameras inside a waterproof housing. That introduces a few optical challenges, which can be dealt with by introducing a dome port on the housing. Getting rid of one problem creates another: a now curved image that our land camera inside the housing has to shoot without looking curved. The solution is to stop your lens down and therefore flatten the depth of field to make that image look normal. That's why most underwater photography,

no matter how amazing the shot, is in focus from near to far. For me, it lacks sensuality. The solution was to have the Sexton Corporation in the US build a truly dedicated custom underwater camera – the perfect one-trick pony. I ended up with an ultra-large-format analogue camera that uses a 155mm lens as a wide angle and exposes a 24x36cm negative. No crazy wide fisheye or superduper macro. She embraced that space at a distance of 1.80m with such elegance and plasticity... I revisit that memory over and over by looking at the prints. And yeah, well... she is pretty big.

**The power of emotion is especially important to you when it comes to choosing your subject (prehistoric fish, taxidermy butterflies, etc.). Do you feel that emotion will win over the technique? Is this your chosen way of storytelling?**

**GT:** That one gets a short answer. I believe in the old design rule: form follows function. For me, emotion is always the function, and the form will always follow. I am a portrait photographer. I know my place. I know my heroes.

**Besides your rather poetic approach when it comes to what's on your photograph, you also use special paper and a cover for your color prints. Tell us a little more about how the motif, paper, and other materials add to the final effect of the photographs you create.**

**GT:** I make black-and-white platinum prints, mostly on Japanese Kozo and Gampi paper. It took quite a while for the printer in me to live up to the photographer's expectations. Putting a truly unique angle on such a complicated printing technique took me years to develop. I can hear some people saying that platinum printing is, at its core, not so complicated... yeah, well. That's true – until you try to control it and truly make it your own. The great thing about it is that it is liquid and can be applied to any kind of paper. So I did just that and found my papers, chemistry, temperature, developers, etc. The how's and why's are for me to hold on to and for the viewer to hopefully feel when it all comes together as the final piece. Ideally, a feeling that reminds you of a memory. So that you feel a little bit drawn out of your own space and time.

**If you could travel back in time and choose one past decade (when photography was already invented), which decade would this be and why?**

**GT:** I adore and have so much respect for the DOPs of the 1920s, '30s, and '40s. The amount of light they had to use and the kinds of lights they did it with are just breathtaking. *Lights, camera, action!* was born from the fact that they used carbon arc lights – basically welding torches in a lamp housing. Those things ran so hot they needed to be switched off in-between takes.

Also, the film stock was not very fast but mega sharp. The sets were so brightly lit to have that deep depth of field Hollywood Look, while nuances of shade and darkness happened between an F8 and F22. After a few hours, you can't see the difference anymore. That's why they used those dark glasses around their neck to bring down the eyes' sensitivity. I could go on... sorry, I am a nerd.

**What are your next series, projects, and productions? Would you be open to acting again?**

**GT:** I am going through all the underwater negatives of my past trips and seeing which ones print well. Last year I started shooting uranium glass vases and objects. Not to go into crazy details, but: I trigger the uranium used in the glass with UV light and shoot only the illumination it produces. Shot in complete darkness, it is fascinating how the object basically exposes itself onto the film. At first, you think, yeah, it's a photo of a beautiful vase. Yet after a few moments, you realize something is different about it. I love them; they have a unique soul.

As far as acting goes... During the last few years of my acting career I lost my clear focus on why I do what I do. When that happens, people can't appreciate your true value anymore. It was nobody's fault but mine, and I swore to myself that I would only step in front of a camera again if I really had something to say. Looking back on how I've evolved over the last 15 years, I would be excited and prepared when opportunity knocks at my door...

**Curious about more? Follow Gregor Törzs on Instagram at [@gregortoerzs](#), and check out his website [www.gregor-toerzs.com](http://www.gregor-toerzs.com)**