

# Interview with Swiss filmmaker Christian Frei, writer-director of COVID pandemic documentary *Blame*: “I wanted to be a filmmaker guided by curiosity, not ideology”

**Benjamin Mateus**  
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Swiss filmmaker Christian Frei recently spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* about his latest documentary, *Blame*, which offers a sobering and humanizing portrait of three scientists—Drs. Peter Daszak, Linfa Wang and Zhengli Shi—who have been thrust into the political maelstrom surrounding the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Frei, best known for his Oscar-nominated *War Photographer* (2001) and the award-winning *Genesis 2.0* (2018), is widely regarded for his calm, reflective and visually rich approach to filmmaking. With *Blame*, released in 2025, Frei turns his lens toward one of the most fraught topics in recent global history—the origin of SARS-CoV-2—and the intense scrutiny and scapegoating faced by leading virologists in the wake of the pandemic.

Rather than fueling conspiracy theories or indulging in sensationalism, *Blame* reconstructs the story from the ground up, focusing on the scientific collaboration that existed well before COVID-19 emerged, and the disturbing way public discourse has shifted in its aftermath. The film avoids easy narratives and instead raises deeper questions about the collapse of trust in science, the politicization of expertise and the role of media in amplifying suspicion.

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**Benjamin Mateus (BM):** The COVID-19 pandemic was a turning point, an accelerant that intensified this global breakdown. Rather than serving as a moment to expand and strengthen public health infrastructure, it was weaponized. We saw a systematic assault on public health, on science, and on the very idea of collective care. Social services were slashed, and the pandemic became a tool to enrich the financial oligarchy, deepen militarization, and crush dissent.

This wasn't a failure of policy—it was the policy. It was the logic of a system in crisis. The message was clear: let millions die, the economy must go on.

**Christian Frei (CF):** Absolutely—and we're right in the middle of that crisis. When I was in Poland recently with *Blame*, I had six screenings, including one in Łódź, home of the famous film school, and others in Warsaw and Gdańsk.

What struck me was that after every screening, the discussions weren't really about the film's direct subject—viruses, COVID-19, or even the lab leak theory. Instead, the conversation almost immediately shifted to something deeper: the collapse of our ability to engage in fact-based, evidence-driven discourse. People weren't debating the science—they were grappling with the broader political crisis, the breakdown of trust and how it's affecting every part of society.

There's a sense that we can no longer agree on basic facts. And that, in itself, has become a profound and destabilizing issue.

**BM:** Your latest documentary film *Blame* confronts the misunderstood

and politicized question of COVID-19's origins, through fact—grounded in science and human experience. *Blame* offers a powerful counter to the false narrative that the virus was manufactured or intentionally leaked.

Centering the story on Peter Daszak, Shi Zhengli, and Linfa Wang was a brilliant choice. It made science accessible and gave the film emotional depth. These are scientists who, until recently, worked quietly—attending meetings, conducting audits, talking with regulators. You also raise critical questions, like why are we attacking scientists and why are we undermining the very people trying to protect us? Perhaps we can begin by having you introduce yourself, share what brought you into filmmaking and teaching, and explain how *Blame* came to be.

**CF:** I keep two quotes in my editing room. The first is from journalist Maria Ressa's Nobel lecture. “Without facts, you can't have truth. Without truth, you can't have trust. Without all three, we have no shared reality, no democracy, and it becomes impossible to deal with the existential problems of our time.”

There's something almost old-fashioned in that belief—but I hold onto it. And I share it, incidentally, with James Nachtwey [Nachtwey is a photojournalist and the subject of Frei's Academy Award nominated film, *War Photographer*]. You could mock him for being naive—for believing that a camera can fight war, that photography can push back against destruction. But he believes it. And I find that deeply moving.

The second quote is from Ernest Hemingway, which I discovered it while living in Cuba. “That is what the artist must do. He must capture the thing so truly that its magnification will endure.” That's the aim of art: truth and magnification.

It may sound old-fashioned, but it's still what drives me. And it's what film can uniquely do. We still have this incredible privilege—people enter a darkened room, free from distraction, and for a time, they give themselves over to the story. You're not competing with a second screen or the noise of other channels. You're alone with the image. That's where the magnification happens—not just technically, but emotionally and morally. And I never take that for granted.

Being able to spend years working on a single film—that's a real privilege. And it defines my life now. I typically work four or five years on one project. I've never inherited money; I wasn't born into wealth. But I've had the good fortune to make a living from this work. Of course, the films eventually must succeed, but the fact that I can dedicate not just days or weeks—as journalists often must—but years to fully immerse myself in a reality... that's extraordinary. And I don't take it lightly. I feel deeply fortunate to do what I do. Passionate, even. Looking back, I realize I've never done anything else. There's no other payroll in my life—only filmmaking.

My first feature came relatively late. I was in my mid-30s when I shot *Ricardo, Miriam y Fidel* (1997) in Cuba—nearly 30 years ago now. Before that, I had studied under Stephan Portmann. [Frei's early film training took place through workshops led by Stephan Portmann (1933–2003) in Solothurn, Switzerland. He continued studying under Portmann at university in Fribourg, Switzerland].

I began filmmaking as a teenager in Portmann's Super 8 workshops in Solothurn. I was already shooting photography, but Portmann taught me that filmmaking isn't about technical tricks—it's about essence and economy. One of my early projects documented a radical monastery where everyone shared income. We spent weeks behind its walls, and that experience—capturing a hidden way of life—shaped everything I've done since.

I'm deeply grateful to Portmann for the mentorship. But I also needed a contrast. So, in the early 1980s, I moved to Basel and worked for Ciba-Geigy (which later became Novartis), creating short documentary-style films about scientific research. Coming from a left-wing background, this felt like a shift. Yet I wasn't making PR—it was honest storytelling: what the scientists were doing, why it mattered, even how they worked with animals in contentious experiments. That period cemented something essential for me: I wanted to be a filmmaker guided by curiosity, not ideology.

And I've never looked back. Only years later, in my mid-thirties, I shot my first feature-length film, *Ricardo, Miriam y Fidel*, in Cuba. That project, and those early experiences, continue to inform my commitment to slow, intimate, truth-seeking films.

I always approach filmmaking with empathy and curiosity—not with a fixed agenda. I've never been interested in contributing to media frenzy or the echo chambers we now call bubbles. I try to resist the pressure to deliver what's expected.

*Ricardo, Miriam y Fidel* began with a story that seemed small and personal, but it opened onto something much larger. It's about a Cuban revolutionary—Ricardo—who left Havana for the Sierra Maestra to help build *Radio Rebelde*, which was vital to the success of the Cuban Revolution. He was close to Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, though his motivation was more anti-Batista than ideologically leftist. He also left behind his infant daughter, Miriam.

Decades later, she's living in Havana, listening to Radio Martí, the Voice of America broadcast directed at Cuba from blimps over the Florida Keys. Eventually, she leaves for Miami and finds herself adrift. She's not a right-wing exile, and she doesn't fit into the hardline Cuban-American community around her. She had criticized Cuba's lack of free expression, but in Miami she encounters media excess and political hysteria. I wrote at the time: she fled from a country of censorship to a country of media overkill. That contradiction stayed with me. It's relevant even today, as we talk about *Blame*, and the limits of our current media landscape. Insight doesn't emerge from clickbait and hyperventilation.

With *War Photographer*, I again defied expectations. People wanted an adrenaline-fueled film about the dangers of war. But I wasn't interested in heroism or spectacles. Wars are, of course, dangerous—but above all, they are profoundly sad, even numbing. And for the journalists and photographers who cover them, there's a deeper contradiction. How do you live with the fact that your work depends on the suffering of others? In the film, Nachtwey reflects on this. He's not an adrenaline junkie or a thrill-seeker. He's someone who questions himself, who lives in that morally gray zone. When *War Photographer* came out, there was some backlash—critics accused war photographers of voyeurism, of “war pornography.” I felt that was unfair and overly simplistic. My aim was to offer a more thoughtful, human perspective.

That's what interests me: not hyped-up narratives, but films that slow down, explore complexity, and reveal what lies beneath the surface.

**BM:** After watching *War Photographer*, I thought an alternative title

could be *The Antiwar Photographer*. The film resists glorifying war and instead offers a deep human perspective. What struck me was how you captured not just the devastation—poverty, destruction, displacement—but also the ethical complexity of Nachtwey's role.

Ultimately, the film shows an artist who is not detached from his subject, but deeply intimate with it. That's what gives the film its emotional weight and lasting impact.

**CF:** Thank you.

**BM:** With *Blame*, you took on the immense complexity—and controversy—of COVID-19. How did you approach both the scientific and political dimensions of the pandemic in a way that balanced nuance and clarity?

And more broadly, why do you think so few documentaries have seriously examined the pandemic, or the attacks on science and scientists, with the depth and focus your film offers?

**CF:** You're right—many videos and films produced during the pandemic were vehicles for misinformation, conspiracy or political opportunism. There's no shortage of content, but very little serious, thoughtful engagement with what the pandemic truly meant—especially the attacks on science and scientists.

For me, every film starts with what I call an epiphany. It's not a concept I invent—it's something that overwhelms me, something I recognize intuitively as my next four-year commitment. That happened with *Blame*. I read a 2005 Science article describing how three scientists—Peter Daszak, Shi Zhengli, and Linfa Wang—had been working since the original SARS outbreak in 2003 to understand and prevent future coronavirus pandemics. They had predicted that another spillover would come. When COVID-19 hit, it confirmed what they had long warned. But instead of being recognized, they became scapegoats. That struck me as a kind of Cassandra story—truth-tellers punished for seeing what others refused to.

So, I wasn't distracted by the noise or the growing conspiracy theories. I wasn't blind or naive—I've read over a thousand articles about pandemics and the origins of COVID-19—but none of it shook my conviction in the film's core premise. I stayed with the human story.

I also understood early on that the pandemic had created an opening for something far more dangerous. When I saw Steve Bannon tell Trump to stop praising President Xi for China's pandemic response—which, frankly, had also been swift and effective—I realized what was happening. Bannon understood something fundamental: that uncertainty itself could be weaponized. Most people respond to a crisis by seeking clarity. But Bannon saw in uncertainty a strategic opportunity—to undermine trust in science, in institutions, in the so-called “deep state.” That's how you build a right-wing authoritarian regime. You erode the foundation of shared reality.

I didn't foresee all of that explicitly in 2020, but maybe I sensed where it could lead. Still, my focus remained on the people—on these three scientists. Their stories anchored the film.

Of course, the logistics of it were difficult. I began in 2020 with long conversations—not interviews, but real dialogues—over Zoom with Peter and Linfa. Like many filmmakers that year, I considered using Zoom footage, but I ultimately rejected it. I wanted something more cinematic, more enduring. I sent professional sound engineers—one to New York, the other to Singapore—so that while I spoke to them remotely, the audio would still meet the standards of a proper film. Much of that ended up as voiceover in *Blame*.

We planned to film in China, but that was impossible. Instead, I chose northern Thailand, specifically the karst landscapes and cave systems that closely resemble Yunnan Province. It was also culturally appropriate—the communities we filmed with, like the Karen and the Red Lahu, are ethnically Chinese, though they migrated to Thailand more recently. In a way, filming there became a kind of visual proxy for southern China. It felt authentic, and I still believe it was the right decision.

It took time—more than I would have liked. I spent December 2021 on the ground in Thailand doing research, and we didn't begin the shoot until December 2022. But that's the nature of this kind of work. It demands patience.

**BM:** The access you had in *Blame* is remarkable—very few people have had the opportunity to speak directly with Shi Zhengli. I managed to reach out to Linfa Wang as well, though he declined an interview. And with Peter Daszak, it took quite a long time to build trust. I was very appreciative when he eventually offered us an exclusive conversation.

Could you talk about how you approached each of them, particularly Shi? What was the process of building trust and navigating the sensitivities around their work and public perception?

**CF:** David Quammen—you might know him—is the science writer behind the classic *Spillover* and more recently *Breathless*, which is a major reference for anyone investigating the origins of COVID-19. He lives in Montana and was incredibly helpful to the project. For *Breathless*, he interviewed over 100 scientists, so by the time we began working together, he knew the landscape inside and out.

In our early Zoom calls—this would've been 2020 or maybe early 2021—David joined the conversations with me. We became a kind of duo in reaching out, especially to Peter Daszak, because we understood that building trust was going to be difficult.

Peter, early in the pandemic, had been open with the media. But over time, he began encountering what he called “both-sides journalism”—requests framed as neutral, but in fact subtly accusatory. The way questions were phrased, the assumptions beneath them... he could tell that many weren't interested in understanding, only in fueling controversy. And as a scientist, it's incredibly difficult to explain your work—let alone the broader context—to people without a scientific background. That tension makes it even harder to navigate interviews.

So, we approached him very clearly and respectfully. I said I was interested in the origins of SARS, going back to 2003. That's the story that drew me in. And that's how we framed our initial conversations—with Peter, with Linfa Wang and eventually with Shi Zhengli.

Of course, with Shi it was even more delicate. You can't just knock on the door in Beijing or Wuhan and say, “Hi, I'm a filmmaker.” Many tried. All failed. I didn't even try that route. I've spent my career learning how to work across systems with very different relationships to the media and freedom of expression.

And I have had the privilege of time. That made a big difference. Peter later told me he'd received interest from others wanting to make films, but he chose to work with me because I had already done the groundwork—and because my intentions were clear. From the beginning, I saw this as a Cassandra story. These three scientists had warned of a coming pandemic, and when it happened, they weren't thanked—they were attacked. I wasn't interested in “both-sides-ism” or using them as narrative fodder. I wanted to understand their point of view, in depth.

I told them I would read all perspectives, including criticism and scientific counterarguments. And if I came across something credible or fact-based that challenged their story, I would ask them about it directly. But I never encountered a moment where I felt deceived. Not once. That, to me, was remarkable.

**BM:** As public health historian George Rosen argued, pandemics don't destroy civilizations. Rather, they become possible when civilizations are already in decline. Scientists like Daszak, Shi and Linfa weren't the only ones sounding the alarm. But when COVID hit, there was no real structural response. And five years on, the consequences are staggering: the erosion of public health institutions, the rise of anti-vaccine ideologies and a political climate where reactionary forces are actively dismantling what remains of pandemic preparedness.

Measles is back. Polio. Cholera. We're facing waves of COVID reinfection—including new variants like Nimbus—and yet it's like the

pandemic is being erased in real time.

So, my question is: how do you see *Blame* within this broader historical arc? Not just as a film about pandemic origins, but as a record of a moment when public health, science, and truth were abandoned in favor of political expediency and economic continuity.

**CF:** It's a lot to take in. One of the most striking parallels for me, as I reflected on past epidemics while making *Blame*, was HIV. I lived through that time—I was young, but I witnessed how it unfolded, and it left a lasting impression.

HIV/AIDS wasn't called a pandemic at first, though in retrospect it certainly was. Initially, it disproportionately affected gay men, particularly in the US and Western Europe. And what I saw then, especially in cities like Zurich, was how quickly fear and confusion could morph into suspicion and conspiracy. Gay communities in the 1980s had fought hard for social acceptance in some countries. So, when this devastating disease emerged and targeted them, it naturally triggered a deep distrust. Why us? Why now?

The association of sexuality and death created a toxic moral panic. And then there was the institutional failure—the slow response from governments, and even from scientific agencies. Dr. Anthony Fauci, for example, came under intense criticism from AIDS activists for not acting quickly enough to provide access to experimental drugs. There was justified anger and grief. But alongside it came something else: conspiracy theories.

Some believed the virus had come from a US military lab. Today, we know from declassified Stasi archives that this idea wasn't just spontaneous. It was seeded and amplified by Soviet disinformation campaigns. The KGB and East Germany's Stasi deliberately spread the claim that HIV had originated from a Pentagon lab in Fort Detrick, Maryland. This was known as “Operation INFEKTION,” and it was a Cold War psychological operation to stoke distrust in the West. And it worked. Even within progressive and marginalized communities, such rumors found fertile ground—because when science fails to communicate clearly, conspiracy rushes in to fill the vacuum.

That's part of what I see happening again with COVID. The *science* is difficult. It's nuanced. Understanding zoonotic spillover, viral evolution or even the difference between lab research and lab origin—it's complex. But people want simple explanations. “Someone messed up in a lab” is easier to digest than “two related but distinct strains of coronavirus likely emerged from wildlife sold at a seafood market under intense ecological and economic pressure.”

We've seen this pattern throughout history. During the Black Death, people blamed Jews. In every pandemic, scapegoating emerges—not just because of fear, but because societies in decay are looking for targets, not solutions.

That's why I found your website so valuable during my research. There's a commitment to rational analysis, rooted in material conditions. Marxism at its best is a rational framework. And yet it presents its own challenges, right? If you're pro-vaccine, does that mean you're automatically endorsing Big Pharma? Not necessarily. But the far right has weaponized that contradiction. They've co-opted anti-corporate language to push deeply reactionary ideas. Today, it's the Steve Bannons of the world who are rallying against “globalists” and “Big Pharma,” while simultaneously pushing nationalism, denialism and authoritarianism.

This transformation of traditional conservatism—through the Tea Party and into this militant, esoteric, quasi-revolutionary right—is one of the most fascinating and dangerous political evolutions of our time. Fascist movements have always had this strange relationship to science and nature: embracing a mystical “natural order” while rejecting rational thought. Mussolini's regime was full of these contradictions. And I see echoes of that today—especially in how COVID became a catalyst.

Without COVID, I don't think Trump would have risen the way he did in 2020. Nor would so many far-right parties across the world have gained so much ground. The pandemic created a sense of existential rupture—and into that space rushed ideology, fear, and opportunism.

For me, *Blame* isn't just about virus origins. It's about the breakdown of shared reality, and the political consequences of abandoning science when we need it most.

**BM:** The anti-vaccine movement has gained a considerable stranglehold on the social levers during the COVID pandemic though that rightward shift began to accelerate with the Wakefield scandal in 1998, when *The Lancet* published (and later retracted) a fraudulent paper linking vaccines to autism. But the deeper roots go back even further.

There's long been a current of anti-communism and anti-socialism in Western political culture with regards to public health because it relies on institutional cooperation and international collaboration. It was often caught in that crossfire. Over the last century, efforts to eradicate smallpox, measles, and other diseases gave working-class people a sense that the state was, at some level, invested in their wellbeing. Public health has become a vehicle for social trust.

But that trust began to erode in the post-war period, especially after the economic shocks of the 1970s—Nixon abandoning the gold standard, the Vietnam War, deindustrialization. From around 2000, we even see life expectancy for working-class people begin to decline while the rich continue to live longer. That divergence created fertile ground for resentment and suspicion—conditions that reactionary forces quickly exploited to turn people against science and against government itself.

It was like a drought-stricken forest waiting for a spark. COVID was that lightning strike.

**CF:** Yes, and during the making of *Blame*, I found myself increasingly preoccupied with the question of how insecurity and speculation have become an industry—how a state of high alert, like during a pandemic, creates the perfect conditions for misinformation to spread. Influencers, bloggers, even some independent journalists—many of them working from home—began producing constant speculation. Some were aligned with the far right, others came from the left, but they fed the same outrage machine.

What's deeply concerning is how journalism itself has moved closer to this model. I've always thought of documentaries as an antidote to hyperventilating media narratives. But increasingly, even journalism that claims to be investigative is driven by virality, not verification. You get headlines that echo suspicions—often serious ones—without corresponding evidence.

This really became clear to me while making *Blame*. I'd already explored media bubbles and scientific responsibility in *Genesis 2.0* (2018), a film about Siberian mammoth tusk hunters and geneticists like George Church. It raised questions about the limits of genetic engineering, and it was very successful. But I remember Q&As where I had to stop and clarify, "I'm not against science or genetic engineering—it depends on where we go with it." That nuance often gets lost.

With *Blame*, the stakes felt higher. I spent five years immersed in the story of three scientists—Daszak, Shi, and Linfa Wang—who warned of a pandemic like COVID long before it happened. But instead of being heard, they were turned into scapegoats. The working title of the film was *The Host*, and I could feel the atmosphere shifting—more suspicion, more outrage, more finger-pointing.

Of course, some of these critics claimed they were just "asking questions." But there's a difference between genuine inquiry and veiled accusation. If you're going to imply that someone like Zhengli Shi or Peter Daszak helped unleash a global pandemic, you need extraordinary evidence. That standard was rarely met. Yet the insinuations circulated freely—even in outlets like the *New York Times*. Friends would call me and say, "Are you sure? We're reading something very different."

This is what I found disturbing. I'm not against investigative journalism. I support it, and I might even do it myself one day. In a way, *Blame* is investigative—it's the result of years of careful inquiry. But I was committed to understanding these people on their own terms, not using them as dramatic devices to fuel outrage.

Together with my colleague Philipp Markolin, we looked closely at how platforms—many run by people with little scientific understanding—recycled half-truths and speculation. The misinformation wasn't always malicious, but it was amplified and monetized. And the truth is: people are vulnerable to simple narratives. As storytellers, we all reduce complexity—that's part of the job. But there's a line between simplification and distortion.

**BM:** I read Markolin's book [*Lab Leak Fever: The COVID-19 Origin Theory That Sabotaged Science and Society*] and found it compelling. He makes the science behind the pandemic and origins question accessible without compromising laying out why the lab-origin theory doesn't hold up. To date, no credible evidence has emerged linking the pandemic's origin to a laboratory.

Even for non-specialists, the pattern is clear: major pandemics are zoonotic. The WHO's Phase One report established that cases clustered around the Huanan Seafood Market. Later work by scientists Michael Worobey and Kristian Andersen, building on that data, reinforced the spillover hypothesis—connecting it to the wildlife trade and high population density.

However, mainstream media outlets like the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* have fallen back on "both-sides" narratives, if not overtly supporting the Lab-Leak conspiracy. And I don't think this is simply naive—it reflects a broader political shift to the right. Public health and the response to pandemics don't exist outside politics.

**CF:** I do feel we're entering darker times. And as a documentary filmmaker, I don't see myself as a journalist in the traditional sense—I define myself as an artist. There's a long tradition of artists being the irritants, the ones who ask uncomfortable questions, who push against the boundaries of mainstream consensus.

What's interesting, particularly around the lab-leak narrative, is how the media has rewritten its own role. The story goes, a few "brave" journalists came along and uncovered suspicious details—no actual evidence, just enough to keep the speculation alive. And from there, some claim they "discovered" the lab leak, or at the very least, take pride in having raised the possibility.

That narrative has now become more than mainstream. It's become policy. In the US, the lab-leak theory has effectively become official doctrine, even replacing earlier language on government websites like *covid.gov*.

I think some on the left need to seriously reflect on how much they either underestimated this narrative, or worse, how much they participated in amplifying it under the guise of neutrality or open inquiry. Because that space of "just asking questions" has become fertile ground for reactionary politics.

**BM:** When will we be able to see your film in the US?

**CF:** Let's just say that the pandemic has been a cathartic force in many ways.

I've been fortunate to have four of my previous films selected by the Sundance Film Festival. It's a remarkable, if chaotic, event—held in Park City, Utah, a ski resort, with fierce competition. For the international documentary section alone, they receive over 1,000 submissions and accept only 12. When *Blame* wasn't selected, I was deeply disappointed. Especially now, seeing how powerfully the film resonates with audiences.

*Blame* has been invited so far to eight major festivals. I've traveled with it across the world—from São Paulo to Moscow where it won a science festival award; to New Zealand, where it won the best festival category, In Truth We Trust; to Turin in Italy, where it won the Audience Award, to

Munich's DOK.fest, and most recently to Poland.

Poland was especially striking. The festival there—Millennium Docs Against Gravity—has become the second-largest documentary festival in the world. Sponsored by Millennium Bank and held in six cities, it continues to attract huge audiences even after the pandemic. I've done more than a dozen Q&As so far, and the response has been overwhelmingly encouraging. Like my earlier films, *Blame* connects. It provokes.

**BM:** How did audiences react during the Q&As—were they surprised, challenged, or reassured by the film?

**CF:** Yes, that was the interesting thing. When you're not dealing with journalists—people who constantly question your narrative decisions—audiences were more open. They connected to the story emotionally. After all, we all lived through COVID. They saw the RFK Jr. ending, they saw Tucker Carlson, and they recognized the creation of a narrative—one that spoke to their own question: How did we end up here? Why is truth and complexity losing out to simplification and manufactured stories? And that was the core of the audience's reaction.

In Germany, for example, maybe one out of ten questions mentioned the film's release coinciding with a major lab-leak "exclusive" in the press—which was essentially a recycled story. But even then, the questions were more reflective: why are journalists still so obsessed with speculation? People were ready to question not just the media, but themselves—their own vulnerability to manipulation. They spoke about their kids, TikTok, the addictive nature of the device in our hands. Many praised the film for being slow in the best sense—not boring, but calm, deliberate. Not another avalanche of speculation. That's what led to the Audience Award in Turin. The film gives space to reflect.

We also talked about the blurring line between journalism and influencer culture. So much media today is indistinguishable from clickbait blogs. It's all part of the same attention economy. Interestingly, very few Q&As touched on the virus itself or pandemic measures. That's not really my topic. The film is about something deeper: our ability—or inability—to reason together. Viewers said this film needs to be shown to students, scholars and the public at large. Because what's under attack isn't just science—it's our entire foundation for evidence-based thinking.

**BM:** Earlier, you mentioned reading material on COVID from the *World Socialist Web Site*. I'm curious—what are your thoughts on how we've presented the pandemic and our broader perspective?

**CF:** I found the *World Socialist Web Site*'s COVID coverage refreshing. You had a clear, consistent line—not just on the pandemic itself, but on the origins debate. That stood out to me, especially when so many on the left ended up in deeply contradictory positions. Some even helped legitimize what has effectively become the Trump Doctrine on COVID origins.

And this confusion isn't just abstract—it's everywhere. I went to an osteopath for back pain. A friendly, esoteric guy. Crystals and candles in the waiting room, books about breathing, meditation—and right next to those, anti-Fauci books and RFK Jr.'s *The Real Anthony Fauci* and *The Truth About Wuhan*, which targets two of my film's protagonists. That kind of convergence—between the wellness world, anti-science rhetoric and conspiracy—is both fascinating and alarming.

That's why I think I can contribute something. I don't care if someone comes from the left or right—I want them to listen. In Switzerland, we still had relatively sane debates around COVID measures: how much risk, how much economic impact. These were political discussions, not absolute truths. And that's what's been lost: a reasonable culture of disagreement rooted in reality and trust.

But that kind of trust isn't very fashionable in my field. In documentary, suspicion often fuels the storytelling—sometimes for good reason, especially in investigative work. But we've gone too far. We've drowned in speculation and noise. That's why the monk in *Blame* matters to me—he retreats into darkness to meditate, to find clarity. As he says, from a

Buddhist perspective, to get to truth, you must strip away distraction.

In that sense, I feel a real solidarity with your work. Not because we agree on everything, but because we're trying to return to complexity and seriousness.

I remember a time—like during the golden era of documentaries—when filmmakers with very different political opinion would still sit together, watch each other's films, and gain deeper understanding. That kind of exchange feels increasingly rare. We live in a world of endless screaming. Steve Bannon said it himself: flood the zone with shit. And that's what happened.

Soon, COVID and RFK Jr. will probably be drowned out by the next geopolitical crisis—Iran, perhaps. But the damage is done. And the next pandemic will come. Are we prepared? No. Not for the virus, and not for the disinformation pandemic that will come with it.

**BM:** What is your next project?

**CF:** I never speak about a new project too early. It's like being pregnant—at first, you can keep it to yourself, but eventually it becomes visible. Right now, it's still too delicate. People often say, "You're always on top of the big issues," and yes, that's meaningful, but it also feels like a burden. Even if I were already falling in love with a new topic, I wouldn't say anything yet.

The truth is, I'm still traveling with *Blame*. We're organizing scientific panels around the film in different cities, and I hope it will continue to reach broader audiences. It's not a "sexy" film, in the marketing sense—but I believe it resonates deeply. Maybe we just need to reach a point where people are genuinely exhausted by all the noise. Then a film like this can truly land.



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