

*“If I can just turn a light on inside of people...”*  
Freerider Mat Schaer on the journey to Shelter



*Words by Kate MacLeod*

*Images 'Shelter' Movie Press Kit & Kate MacLeod*

When Serge Lambert was a child, his father could remember seeing the Rhone Glacier stretching down into the valley below, the river of ice reaching to where the rising road divides to form two mountain passes – the Grimsel and the Furka. By the time Lambert grew up and was working regularly in the mountains around the Furka Pass as a mountain guide, the glacier had significantly receded. “By that time, the glacier was up to the big bend at the hotel. And today, there’s just a waterfall there, and a lake behind it.”



In total, since 1847, the Rhone Glacier has retreated 1.631 kilometres. During fourteen days of heatwave last summer, Alpine glaciers lost around 800 million tonnes of snow and ice.

Matthew Huss, of Glacier Monitoring Switzerland, compares this to a cube of ice three times higher than the Eiffel Tower – or the quantity of drinking water consumer by the 8.5 million Swiss population in the space of a year. And scientists are warning that if greenhouse gas emissions continue to rise, Europe could have lost all its glaciers by the end of this century.

Shelter, the new production from Picture Organic Clothing and Almo films, begins with a narrative celebrating the majesty of the mountains and the beginning of mountaineering in the Alps. Stunning drone footage of mountain summits swept by cloud, a winding black river slicing through a white valley, an avalanche thundering past snow clad trees, and jagged glaciers gleaming turquoise, are interspersed with close up shots of a man, with a white beard and compelling blue eyes behind spectacles, stoking the fire in a mountain shelter before settling down to read.

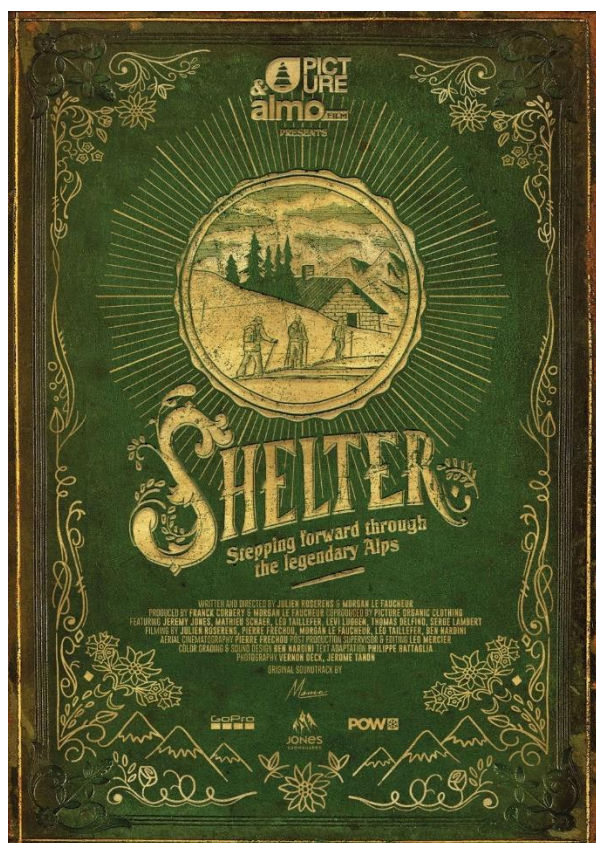
Then, in stark juxtaposition to the stunning expository landscapes, in the next cut the drone rises to reveal a glacier shrouded in sheets, the dingy discolouring of the protective cladding a jarring contrast to the mesmerising montages of pristine snow and translucent ice that have preceded this. The narrator's gravelly tones continue the voiceover: "Humanity recognises the fragile balance that surrounds it. But the economy has other considerations. Industrialisation is reaching for the sky with ever larger factories and taller smokestacks. The countdown has started..."



I am supposed to meet Mathieu Schaer on the last Friday in January. The forecast is for sun after fresh snow midweek, and Schaer, a twenty-nine year old Swiss



professional freeride snowboarder, is planning on doing some filming in the back country around Champéry, one of the thirteen resorts that links the vast Portes du Soleil ski area, and only twenty minutes by electric mountain train from the little town of Troistorrents where I live. Shelter is the brainchild of Schaer, who has been an ambassador for the Swiss branch of Protect Our Winters Switzerland since it was founded by Nicholas Bornstein in 2017, and the plan is for us to meet up after Schaer finishes filming to talk about the movie and its goals.



However, the plan doesn't work out. Rain at high altitude means that conditions in Champéry are poor, and Schaer and his crew head to Nax, further up the Rhone valley, instead. Schaer messages me and we arrange to meet the next afternoon, on his way back through to Champéry. By Saturday afternoon, when Schaer arrives in Troistorrents, it's raining, and too mild for any hopes that the precipitation will turn to snow. Conditions in Nax were sketchy, Schaer tells me, with avalanche risk considerable. Not ideal for riding or filming. Schaer doesn't own a car, so he rocks up still in his snowboard boots, carrying not just his Jones board, but a backpack and several bags. Standing in his socks, and a long-sleeved black top under his Picture brick-

orange bib pants, hat hair all awry, he accepts a mug of peppermint tea and we sit down to talk.

The first time we hear Schaer speak in Shelter, it's on Jeremy Jones' answer phone. Jones, who founded the original Protect Our Winters in 2007 and Jones Snowboards in 2010, is packing his bag; he's coming to Europe for the ISPO in Munich, and Schaer has taken advantage of Jones being on the same continent to invite him to be part of a very special film project – a snowboard movie with a difference: like Jones' legendary trilogy – Deeper, Further and Higher – Shelter will not be using helicopters or snowmobiles for either rider transportation or filming; the new angle for Shelter is that the riders will be travelling to the different ski areas they intend to explore using the local public transportation systems. Schaer's purpose in Shelter is to show that not only is it possible to make a snowboard movie with a minimal carbon footprint, but to illuminate that sometimes the greatest discoveries lie in our very own backyards. "I can't wait to show you our local playground!" he exclaims to Jones.

The film then cuts to Schaer himself, sitting on a bench at a dark pre-dawn train station. He gives an impatient, anticipatory breath and it floats white in the frosty air. As a pink sunrise seen through the windows of a train turns industrial structures rose, we see French rider Thomas Delfino inside reading his kindle; another cut takes



us to Swiss Levi Luggen engrossed in a book as the sun rises on the lake beyond the train tracks. As the riders congregate on the platform at Martigny, a very laden Leo Taillefer walks up carrying his skis. “Shit,” says the Val d’Isere local in French. “How did you get everything to fit in your backpacks?”

They board the next train together. Jeremy Jones marvels to Schaer that they’re going to be staying in a shelter – the Grand St Bernard Hospice – that’s over one thousand years old: “We call something in the US old at a hundred years old,” he comments wryly. The train flows through the snowy Rhone Valley – a “train ride to powder,” Schaer says with a big smile.

It’s an unconventional start to a snowboard movie.

Some on touring skis, some on splitboards, the riders tramp through the snow to the first hut of the film. Inside, Jones is painting a water colour. Skins dry above the fire. The guys cook pasta and sit down to dinner together. They talk about the crisis that has necessitated a movie like Shelter. “We definitely don’t have all the solutions but we do have a ton of them,” Jones states with conviction. “As an industry we weren’t doing enough and we needed to come together to do something; we are all so fortunate to be able to do what we do, to be here...we all have a voice and the very least we can do is try to use that voice to get people to care about the climate and act on climate; to be a climate champion.”

Splitboarding has been around since the early nineties, with the first prototype created in a basement in Utah by USFS avalanche forecaster, Brett Kobernik. Today, splitboarding and Jeremy Jones have become synonymous. “I started Jones Snowboards to develop the highest performance all-mountain boards on the market – freeride boards that reflect everything I’ve learned both on the snow and in the factory. Every snowboard we produce is born of my passion.”

So where does passion begin?

For Mat Schaer, it started in the resort of La Clusaz, in the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes region in south-eastern France. Here, less than an hour from his home town of Geneva, he learned to ski when he was three years old. The youngest of three brothers, when he was nine, he and his middle brother decided they wanted to try snowboarding, just like their oldest brother, Nelson. “So my parents rented us snowboards for the weekend and we never switched back!” Schaer speaks of the adrenaline of freestyle and freeriding, but what he loves most is “to be in the nature, in the mountains; it’s a sport that you do with friends, all of you trying to improve and sharing the common passion of skiing and snowboarding.” As for splitboarding, Schaer describes it as a revolution: “I love it, even more than normal snowboarding – the possibility to access so much; and, not just that, but now I enjoy the uphill too: it’s part of the process – to be outdoors, to have a goal of the point you are trying to reach, walking and talking with friends. It’s like in the summer, you hike because you want to be out in nature, seeing beautiful colours and smelling pine. With splitboarding, the downhill just becomes the reward; you appreciate the single or few rides you have a day even more, and that’s something I love.”

For Serge Lambert, the blue-eyed man in the mountain hut in the opening scenes of Shelter, a man who has been a guide in the Alps for fifty years, a definitive moment that gave birth to his passion for the mountains came on a peak not far from the little hut of the film’s exposition. “One day I walked to the summit of La Brinta with a friend of mine...there were no lifts at that time. I remember that moment: the discovery of very far away mountains – it’s a tiny summit but you can look 360 degrees around, from the Mont Blanc to the four thousanders...It was a very strong impression. Then I joined the climbing club around Neuchatel, because I was studying there, so I went more and more in the mountains. If you had told me I would be a guide so long, probably I would say that’s not possible! But it happened. The Alps are a very interesting office...”





Not everyone is fortunate enough to grow up with the natural world a backdrop to treasured memories; the catalyst for adventure and discovery. But if you have, you'll know that your relationship with nature is one to be cherished. You may have your own love story with the outdoors – a moment when a passion was born, a place that nourishes your soul, a pastime that both awakens and fulfils.



We gain so much from our relationship with nature. And so how do we give back?

Mat Schaer has devoted much time to considering this. When he was eighteen, he turned professional, signing his first contract with sponsors DC Shoes. Balancing his studies with attending competitions, his school allowed him some flexibility in terms of attendance – with a caveat: “I could only go snowboarding if I worked well at school and got good grades, so it was kind of the reward – time off was not just given to me. I’ve always tried to find ways to combine snowboarding with my studies – it’s the story of my life, I guess.”

On leaving High School, Schaer spent three months in Whistler, B.C., “learning snowboarding and English” (if Schaer’s eloquence is anything to go by, Whistler Blackcomb may be worth considering as an alternative to a more conventional ESL school), and credits his rapid improvement in the former to the fact this was the first time in his life that he could ride every day, not only on the weekend. He took the next three years off to focus on snowboarding, shooting with esteemed productions such as Absinthe films. “I did what all the pros do: chasing good powder all around the world to have, like, three to four minutes of action footage in a movie. As soon

as there was no more snow in one place, you move on, always taking a plane to where the snow conditions are better, and so the carbon footprint just explodes.”

Around this time, Schaer started to reflect on what he wanted to do with his life once his professional career as a snowboarder was over. His brother was studying Geography at university, and Schaer was becoming increasingly fascinated with the books his brother gave him to read on social and environmental issues. “You learn so much by reading... I was doing sport outdoors, but this is when I started to think more about these issues – I would hang out at my brother’s place with his friends from uni, and all they would all be talking about the environment and climate change; it really motivated me to study these questions further. From the beginning of my snowboarding career, I was meeting people who had finished their pro career and began their studies afterwards, and I always thought that would be difficult – to have one lifestyle, then for that to finish and be living a completely different reality. You know that your career as an athlete doesn’t last forever, so my goal was to try and to both: to find a balance between studies and doing what I love.”



At twenty-two, Schaer was accepted onto a Bachelor’s Degree in Environmental Sciences & Engineering at the highly prestigious EPFL University in Lausanne, Switzerland. “Again, this gave me motivation, because I could combine my snowboarding career with the issues I was studying at university. And this was when I really began to think about how I could use my position as a professional athlete to raise awareness. The climate crisis is a process for many people: a process of understanding. I didn’t wake up one day and think, oh wow, climate change is a big issue! Instead, you hear about climate change, and you read about it, you ‘zoom in’ and learn about different aspects – scientific, social, economical – and gain more knowledge, and when you have more knowledge, you can ‘zoom out’ and see better the big picture. These environmental issues are connected to many others, especially social, and we need to see these problems in a systematic way: as a global problem. If we think about the UN Sustainable Development Goals, these show how everything is interconnected.”

Outside, it's still raining and the sky is darkening. Schaer, a consummate professional, raises the question of the photos I'd mentioned I wanted to take, expressing his concern that we're going to lose the light. We agree to put the interview on hold, and walk up the wet street to the train station, where a boy and girl awaiting the next train with their father are transfixed with interest at the unexpected sight of a photo-shoot at little Troistorrents gare.

Google snowboarder Mat Schaer and you'll get a screenful of photos of Schaer in the snow – or, even more often, up in the sky. A particularly spectacular image by Andrew Miller on the Jones website depicts Schaer in silhouette against a navy sky; backlit, mid-spin indie grab, he is framed by illuminated snow – a trail blazes through the blue behind him like stardust, with Schaer the human meteor. The photo is other-worldly; its subject transcendent. Few of us will experience something like this. It belongs in the realm of the extreme sports athlete.

But Schaer wants Shelter to be relatable, he'll go on to tell me. He stresses that just as all the locations in the movie are accessible by anyone with a train timetable,



all the routes that they take are accessible to any proficient splitboarder or ski tourer with backcountry knowledge and skills. (Although “maybe not all the lines we do...” Schaer concedes.) Sitting on the sofa in his Picture bib pants and blue socks, holding his mug of tea, talking with earnest passion about one of the subjects closest to his heart, his love of nature and the need to protect it, whether through career choices or by bag-laden train trips, Schaer is eminently relatable. This is the side of the multi-faceted man that I want to photograph. The brilliant snowboarder who goes everywhere by public transport, wanting to keep his carbon footprint minimal, hoping to inspire others to think of how we can do the same.



Since both subject and camera are getting rained on, we don't stay out too long. As we walk back to finish the interview, I ask Schaer if he's planning on riding tomorrow. "No," he says. "The forecast is just rain."

After successfully completing his Bachelor's in Environmental Sciences and Engineering, Schaer decided to undertake a Master's. The conclusion of his Bachelor's coincided with his contract with DC



coming to an end, and Schaer felt that this was the point that would mark the transition in his career from pro snowboarder to scientist. "It was not anymore really possible to put in line how I wanted to blend my career and environmental convictions while staying with this brand," Schaer explains, somewhat hesitantly, with a tempered diplomacy that I discover throughout our interview is characteristic. "It was more and more difficult for me, because I wanted to put this theme into my snowboarding, and it was hard to do that with a brand that maybe doesn't share this value as much as I wanted. So I thought, well, I'll start my Master's and that will be the transition: I'll finish the Master's and go and shred for fun, without being a pro."

'Protecting the environment for a sustainable future' declares the subheading in the course outline on the EPFL website, and this epitomises Schaer's own approach. Throughout his Bachelor's degree, Schaer had begun, as much as possible, to adapt his approach to pro-riding, adopting a more sustainable lifestyle – something that being a university student enabled him to do legitimately. "Being at university in Switzerland was a way to take the plane less and focus more on my local mountains. It meant I had a good, true excuse for my sponsors for why I couldn't just fly for three days to go shooting and then come back; I didn't want to do it for my personal footprint, but it meant that I was able to truthfully explain that I had exams and needed to study. Nowadays, everyone is speaking about climate change, not just through POW but in the mainstream media, but eight years ago, this was not the case. So being able to say I had exams meant that I had a good reason to say that I wanted to film in a way that was different from the conventional way. Now, with the help of POW, this attitude is more accepted in the community of the

snowboarding world, and I feel more comfortable to really communicate about it. It is not just accepted, but more and more riders are aware of the problem, and feel the need to be active and spread awareness.”

On the completion of his Master’s, Schaer rode without a sponsor for one year. “But I realised I still had the motivation to ride as a pro; I just needed to find a sponsor that shared my environmental values. With one of my agents, who’s a good friend, we contacted a few of these brands, and that’s how I came to work for Picture.”

Anyone interested in the power of business to be used to implement environmentally friendly practice and lifestyle should take a visit to the website of Picture Organic Clothing, the sustainable



clothing brand created by co-founders Julien, Jérémy and Vincent in 2008. Outdoor-lovers, solution-focused, and consistently true to the ideals their brand was built upon, the company is striving towards fully achieving UN Sustainable Development Goals 12 and 13: Responsible Consumption & Production and Climate Action. “The fight against climate change is more than just a point of view”, they state in the website’s Sustainability section. “It is an obligation.” As the company grew, they began sponsoring skiers, snowboarders and surfers, and producing films: “We at Picture have an obligation to harness the power of communication to inspire people to dream and to change, to build awareness about the world’s current environmental issues, and to present the wide range of viable solutions.”

“Making eco-friendly products is at the core of their business,” Schaer elaborates. “From the beginning, they’ve been trying to find solutions and have a systemic approach. I don’t believe in only focusing on one eco product from an entire line, communicating only about this one – this is green washing. Picture are trying to get away from fossil fuels in how they make outdoor gear (by 2021, all Picture buildings will be 100% eco-responsible), and this is a good parallel with me, as I’m trying to get away from fossil fuels through my snowboarding career. We have the same goals. And, of course, if I’m riding in Picture gear, clothes that have been produced in an



eco-friendly way, then it further helps me stay in line with my values. I was really happy when they got their B Corp Certification (the highest distinction for companies making environmental and social responsibility a core part of their business operation) because it was proof that there is a systemic approach to evolving their business in an environmentally friendly way.”

Committed to the Picture family as a rider, Schaer’s Master’s degree took him to a job at Météo Suisse (The Federal Office of Meteorology and Climatology, Switzerland). “So I am still learning; I am learning new facts on climate change, on the science, but also on the solutions – all the potential solutions that are feasible or not.



It helps too to follow what the IPCC (The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) does – to read their reports, which I had to do regularly as part of my studies. And Météo Suisse gets all the data, of course, and when you see the trends in the data, there is no doubt; you cannot say that the data is wrong. I feel climate change as a snowboarder, but it is even more convincing when you see the data as a scientist.”

So what are the changes that Schaer has experienced himself?

“When I was young, my family used to go to La Clusaz every year at Christmas. I remember playing in the snow in front of the chalet, which is at 1300 metres. Now, there is almost never snow at that level. With climate change, you need to understand it over longer periods of time: temperature changes from year to year is climate variability, not climate change, so you have to watch it over ten or twenty years. What we see now is the snowfall limit is rising; tomorrow it will be raining at 2600 metres, and this is something that we see more and more. We’ve just had one of the warmest Januarys ever; yesterday was like Spring. Last year, making Shelter, there was a big





anticyclone and for four weeks it was super warm: it was 10 degrees Celcius at 2000 metres and we saw wet slide avalanches – this is typically something that happens in April.”

A few days after my interview with Schaer, I meet up with Serge Lambert to speak to him about his involvement in Shelter, his own experiences over fifty years of guiding in the Alpes, and his impressions of the riders themselves. He refers to this segment of the film, appreciating the positive attitude demonstrated by the riders when faced with the unseasonably warm conditions that have them sitting on the railing of the shelter with their tops off, melting snow dripping from the roof of the chalet.

“The conditions were not good for big things,” Lambert observes, “so instead they built jumps and played using the roof of the house and had fun there. This scene was important too because it shows that you can enjoy the environment in different ways – accept, yes, this is not the day for big mountain riding, so we’ll do something else.”

With the massive rise in popularity of off piste skiing and snowboarding, it’s another valuable message within the film: the wise and experienced rider allows the conditions to shape what they do, and does not impose their own desires on adverse conditions. The Journal of Alpine Research predicts that the proportion of wet snow avalanches compared to dry snow avalanches will increase, with the wider variability that we are seeing in winter temperatures leading to an even higher frequency of mid-winter wet snow avalanches. In 2018, the University of Geneva published a report confirming a direct link between global warming and the growing frequency and intensity of avalanches.

It is unsurprising, therefore, that avalanche awareness and safety is entrenched in the Jones brand, symbolised by the fact that stamped in the centre of a Jones splitboard is the five avalanche red flags; you’ll find these in the inside tag in a Jones backpack. Staying safe and knowing when to say “another day then” is fundamental. Jones has stated: “When I get the opportunity to be around long-time backcountry riders or mountaineers, I always try and soak up their knowledge. I often ask, ‘Any advice for being able to do this for my whole life?’ 72-year-old Norwegian snowboard legend summed it up best: “Tomorrow is good too. Ride for Tomorrow.”

One of the things that Shelter didn’t show, but which Lambert tells me about, is what happened that first day when the riders reached the shelter up in Nax.

“Late afternoon, the riders came up, and the first thing they did was to go out a little bit further. They rode small lines, jumps, had fun, and when they came back, this was really interesting – they *knew*; they had already studied the consistency of the snow, checking: is it good snow, is it dangerous? So many riders just go out and ski and snowboard without doing that first, but with these guys, you could see that they

were a bit older and very professional: the first thing they did was analyse the snow and the conditions so they could plan what they could do, which is what I do too as a guide. The first thing you do in a new place is you analyse the situation. And these riders, I was happy to have this experience with them, because they really think about what they are doing.”

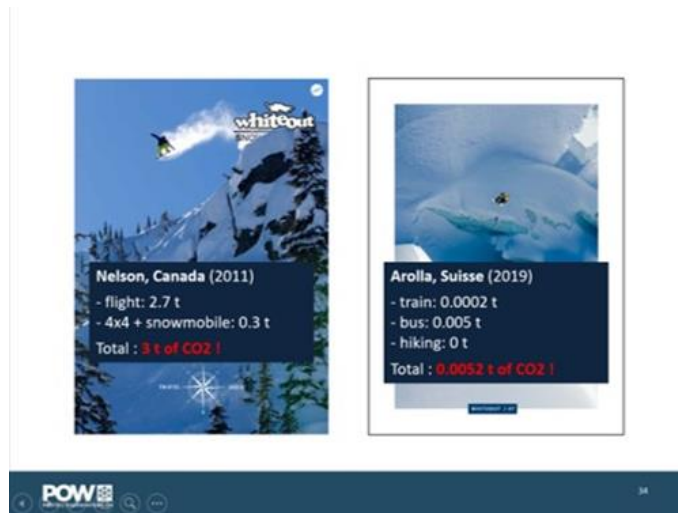


This philosophy of thought – of riding with intelligence, awareness and temperance; of ‘riding for tomorrow’, is one that Schaer embodies, not just in terms of snow safety, but in terms of preserving snow for future generations. When POW Switzerland was founded in 2017, Schaer became one of its first athlete ambassadors, recognising the power that his platform as a professional athlete gave him as a role model to raise awareness. “When I joined POW, it was the perfect way for me to communicate more about environmental issues, and to show how I have tried to reconcile my passion with my environmental convictions.”

“When you calculate the carbon footprint related to being a pro snowboarder, or even an amateur, it is directly linked to transportation, and so this is what I am trying to change as a priority, and to show in my films.” Schaer tells me that one of the questions that he is asked quite often in the presentations he delivers as part of POW’s Hot Planet / Cool Athletes programme is why he doesn’t showcase the other lifestyle changes he has made in order to lower his carbon footprint; he explains that his particular purpose is trying to illustrate how he is questioning ways in which his approach to his career can be more sustainable. “Eating mainly vegetarian, buying

less, having green electricity...this is more about choices in my personal life; as a pro, what is most relevant is to focus on what is related to snowboarding – transportation is directly linked to what I do, and so I want to show that I can keep doing what I love with a reduced carbon footprint.”

In his HP/CA presentation, one slide perfectly illustrates the truth in Schaer’s words. On the slide are two magazine covers featuring Schaer riding. The first image, Schaer sending a cliff in Nelson, Canada, in 2011, has a CO2 footprint of 3 tonnes. In the second, an incredible photograph of Schaer jumping a glacial crevasse in Arolla, Switzerland, taking during the filming of Shelter, has a CO2 footprint of 0.0052 tonnes.



“It’s almost a factor of 500,” Schaer summarises. “And it shows that you can change the approach but still have similar results – and this idea has so many parallels, because you can apply it to everything. And change is not necessarily negative either; it can bring us more comfort or happiness, or be more practical.”

We discuss the ‘grass is greener’ mentality that we humans have a tendency to fall victim to, and the Instagram promoting ethos of marking places we’ve visited with a photo and a few hashtags – the twenty-first century equivalent of ‘been there, done that, got the T-shirt’ – that cultivates a culture in which the quantity of destinations ‘checked’ is what’s desirable, rather than the amount of time spent discovering a place. (In an interview with Picture, Schaer lyrically observes that “discovery does not translate into the number of airports that we cross...but by the time spent to understand the environment, culture and inhabitants of the destination visited.”

Since Schaer stopped flying, he’s found that some of the best and most memorable places he’s ever ridden are right here in his own backyard – the Glacier de Moiry (“It’s one of the most beautiful places I’ve ever snowboarded”), a couloir in the spectacular Dents du Midi, a hidden bowl with a lake and “so many possibilities for freeriding and freestyling...” Schaer sums up the contradiction inherent in the ‘grass is greener’ mindset, sharing an anecdote about a conversation with a Canadian woman who works at Patagonia. “She was from B.C., and I said that, when I was a kid, we all wanted to go to Whistler; she replied that everyone from Whistler just wanted to go to the European Alps.”

Though ‘Shelter’ hopes to galvanise change towards lessening our carbon footprints, Schaer is appealingly undidactic. When I ruefully share my own arguably “grass is



greener” dream of wanting to ride powder through the trees in Japan, and explain that I feel like I can’t really justify the carbon footprint to fly there – certainly not while I’m living in the heart of the Alps, at any rate – Schaer is matter-of-fact. “As I have said, I don’t want to give lessons: if your dream is to go once to Japan, then do it. The problem is that for the environment the poison is in the quantity; it’s not doing something or not doing it, it’s how much we do it. If we put too much pollutant into our atmosphere, at a certain point the planet cannot keep up – much in the same way as our bodies; many things are poisonous only if you take more of a certain quantity. This is why I’m not saying that kids shouldn’t be going to Whistler, but maybe just realise that we don’t need to go there regularly; that we can fulfil our desires much closer to home.”



One of the aspects that Schaer has most valued about his work as a POW ambassador is the opportunity it has given to him to have conversations about the climate crisis with many different people: to be asked questions; even – or especially – to be challenged. “The film and our HP/CA presentation introduce the subject, and that then becomes the starter for really interesting question and answer sessions, and debates. What is great to see is how solution-focused the discussion is, and this is what the movie was about: not just to raise awareness, but to try and bring people to question things related to global warming and, as mountain lovers, to think about how we can make our approach to our sport more eco-friendly. A real strength of the movie is that it facilitates discussion; and this is when I feel like I can touch people, which is what we need to do to fight climate change – it’s such a global problem that we need to touch everyone, and it’s easiest to touch people when it’s through something that they love.”

So what does Schaer feel about what Jeremy Jones has achieved by creating POW?

He is unequivocal. “If you were to ask me today who my idol is, it would be Jeremy Jones. What he has done by creating POW is so important for me. And the fact he created it in 2007 is even more impressive; back then, people were not talking about climate change in the way that they are now – today, it’s almost become trendy to be talking about it, but this was not the case back then. You need to have courage, as a pro snowboarder in an industry with a big carbon footprint, to stand up and raise awareness and bring the whole winter sports community to care about this issue. I give him so much credit and respect for that; he is an amazing role model.”

Schaer, like Jones, is constructive and solution focused. He acknowledges that it is more difficult for adults to make lifestyle changes, observing that in many ways it is young people who are more aware of their carbon footprint. “It’s always a harder mental process to change what you’ve been used to for many years, whereas for young people, aware of the issue from a young age, it’s easier to make the choices to have a low carbon footprint.” Schaer admires Greta Thunberg, the teenage climate activist whose solitary strikes sparked the global Fridays for Future movement. Schaer himself has participated in several of the Youth Strike for Climate marches, literally embodying his walk the talk approach to sustainability, but adds that Thunberg was not the first person to motivate him to attend a march. “When I was ten, my Mum took me on a G8 march. It’s important to raise our voices if we want to affect politics and big companies, and one of the ways of doing this is going to the streets in protest.”



Shifting from discussing the power of young people to fight climate change, we talk about Lambert’s involvement in Shelter. This idea originated with Julien Roseren, one of the film’s writers and directors. Schaer elucidates: “We wanted to have a testimony from somebody who has been in the mountain for a long time, and as he’s been guiding for fifty years, he was the best witness of the changing mountains. His involvement also highlighted the intergenerational nature of the problem. He is a guide and we’re professional freeriders, but we share the same kind of love for the mountain, and the same will to protect it.”

When I meet the legendary Lambert a few days later, on a windy morning in the village of Vercorin in the Val d’Anniviers ski area, he is not quite what I’m expecting from the rather romantic portrayal of the ‘old man’ of the mountains in Shelter. There is the white beard, yes, and the spectacles, but the gravitas and contemplative stillness of the film is exchanged for charismatic vitality and exuberance; he is tall

and lean and tanned, and as he strides up the steep street beside me, I have to put in little skippy steps to keep up with his rapid pace. (I learn that if we were descending a mountain together, he would be behind me, watching my feet rather than his own, ready before I would even be aware of it to pre-empt the consequences of a misplaced step. It is an inadvertently pertinent analogy for the selflessness, awareness and forward-thinking from us that future generations deserve.)



It is a privilege to spend time with someone of Lambert's experience in the mountains, and a pleasure too – he is loquacious, frank and humorous. As he tells me of the fulfilment he feels when he looks at the expression on the face of a client who has just achieved their dream of reaching the summit of the Matterhorn, I am struck again by what nature brings to our lives.

Lambert shares the anecdote of his father's own experience of the Rhona Glacier, and elaborates with his own reflections, demonstrating a temperance similar to Schaer's as he balances his observations about the changes he has witnessed in the mountains with his concerns for other extremely important global problems, such as war and famine and poverty. "But there is change – this is absolutely obvious. We are living in a period of warming up. We often take people to see the entrance of the Zenal glacier, but now it's at least a kilometre further back than it used to be. And we have to be careful about what nature gives us because we need it. Don't forget



to try and protect your own garden, your own environment. Stop destroying for money.”

As Schaer states, the science is clear. “We can assess and have a good idea of what the future will be regarding which IPCC scenario we take. All I can do is state what they have. If we continue with business as usual, if we don’t stick to the Paris target, it is going to be more and more catastrophic. We can already see it – the wildfires, this year in Australia, last year in California and Siberia, more tropical cyclones, more extreme events that have a big cost on infrastructures and on life. And as for winter sports...in fifty years from now the skiing industry as we know it is not going to be viable. It’ll just be a few resorts, a few rich people skiing on fake snow. I don’t even know if I will be able to teach my children and transmit my passion to them. It is just really sad.”

And so, together with his friends, Picture, Almo, POW and Jones, Schaer turned his passion into Shelter, the snow-boarding movie he hopes will play a part in heightening consciousness and inspiring change – not just within the world of winter sports, but with Shelter’s philosophy of positive and constructive solutions applied at a universal level. “If I can just turn on a light inside of people and push them to think about what they care about in their life, whether it’s a job or a passion, their home or their lifestyle, and to then question this thing in regard to what has to be done to fight climate change – that is my best wish. This problem is not going to be solved by just some people – we need everyone involved. And I just want to do my part to help.”



After three decades pursuing his passion in the mountains, I end our interview by putting Schaer in the difficult position of asking what his three most treasured memories are from his life as a snowboarder thus far. It's a struggle for Schaer. There are so many. But, after some soul searching: "My first backflip. I was probably fourteen. It was such a big achievement – my brother, my best friend and me, we all did it the same day. We were so happy. And, I would say, jumping that crevasse gap in Shelter. It was such an intense, incredible day. Then, afterwards, instead of going back to the village, we hiked three hours up to the mountain hut at 3000 metres, where they were other people there all heading to high routes; I was already tired from doing the jump, and thirsty and hungry – we got there just in time for dinner, and it was the best dinner of my life. And then the third – riding that couloir in the Dents du Midi with my friends. I've seen those Dents du Midi so many times, so riding them was a highlight for sure."



In order to finish our interview, Schaer has missed the train he needed to catch to get to Champéry. I give him a lift, and we drive up the valley, dark now, with the darker shadow of the Dents du Midi themselves a powerful presence above us. I drop Schaer in the town centre, and with a "Maybe see you in the mountains", he shoulders all his bags and his board, and walks away.

It's a one-way system, and I have to drive through the narrow main street. It's lined with little Christmas trees for the tourists, strung with yellow fairy lights. The reflections from these are shimmering on the soaking wet road. Tourists, hoods up

against the rain, walk hurriedly down the pavement to reach their destinations. The car's thermometer reads eight degrees. It doesn't feel like a ski resort in the middle of winter. I am thinking of Mathieu Schaer – of the little kid playing in the snow outside the chalet at Christmas time; the nine year old falling in love with the sport that will become his career; the teenager euphoric at landing his first backflip with his best friend and his brother; the young man wondering if he'll be able to share his own love of splitboarding and freeriding in the awesome beauty of the Alps with his own child...and I hope, more than anything, that he will. That there is a future for all of us and for the generations still to come of adventure and discovery and fun and friendship in snowy mountains and on ancient glaciers.

As Shelter reaches its close, the narrator's powerful voiceover resumes: "We are balanced on the shoulders of a fragile giant, on whose survival counts that of every living species. We need to free ourselves from over-consumption, taking back the control of our resources in favour of a life-saving sobriety. Living in harmony with nature is becoming a political act, a strong gesture. But there is still time. Confronted by the servitude in which we've become entangled, global consciousness is waking up."

A single snowboarder rides into the sunset, lifting his arms as he speeds over the snow.



*Shelter, a film by Picture Organic Clothing and Almo Films, is [available now on YouTube](#)*