

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 8 (1981)
Heft: 3

Artikel: The Swiss film yesterday and today [to be continued]
Autor: Buache, Freddy
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-907835>

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The Swiss Film Yesterday and Today

From: *The Catalogue of the Swiss Film Week in Japan*

The birth of the Swiss film came late. During the silent era there were a few attempts at filming and at production, but without lasting success. The exploitation of the photogenic possibilities of the Alpine panoramas attracted some foreign directors: Jacques Feyder shot *Visages d'enfants* (1924/25) in the Valais, a film which was to

Freddy Buache

achieve more popularity than the two similar works of Jacques Béranger: *Le pauvre village* (1921) and *La Croix du Cervin* (1922). In Geneva, the film columnist of the newspaper «La Suisse», Jean Choux, who was enamoured of the aesthetic theories dear to the representatives of the Parisian cinema (Louis Belluc, Germaine Dulac, Marcel L'Herbier) made a visually very sophisticated melodrama on the shores of Lake Geneva, *La vocation d'Andre Carrel* (1925), in which one of the major roles was given to a bohemian photographer, Michel Simon, one of Pitoëff's extras. This work lacked neither qualities of intimacy nor a certain lyricism of nature and of the work on the beautiful sailing boats. However, the only nationally made film of the silent era remains *Les origines de la Confédération* (1924) by Emil Harder, an American Swiss who returned to his own country with the intention of bringing into being a seventh art form with international aspirations. He was unable to achieve this. With the advent of sound, the problem of the various languages, as well as of the German dialects, appeared to pose a major obstacle to the desire to

create a Swiss cinema, a wish which has also been expressed in 1924 by Lazar Wechsler, who founded the production company of *Praesens* in Zurich. *Fusilier Wipf* (1938), crowning 15 years of endeavour by this company, represents a first milestone; *La dernière chance* (1944/45), by the same author and the same producer, which the whole world applauded, constitutes the fruit of a creative period: during the war about ten or twelve feature-films were brought onto the market each year. These were often regional films in the local dialect, sometimes of a remarkable poetic harmony, such as *Roméo et Juliette au village* (1942) by Trommler and Schmidely, taken from Gottfried Keller. In the French part of Switzerland, at this time, no economic or technical infrastructure developed in this sector. In 1939, Max Haufler filmed *Farinet* (or *L'or dans la montagne*), taken from C. F. Ramuz, in the Valais. He surrounded the stars, Jean-Louis Barrault and Suzy Prim,

with supporting players often seen in the films of Pagnol, whilst two or three native players provided local colour. Then some attempts at imitating the French cinema (*Manouche*, by Fred Surville, 1943, with Pierre Dudan, or *L'oasis dans la tourmente* by Georges Depallens and Arthur Porchet, with Jean Hort, 1942) ended in artistic and financial disaster. After 1945 everything returned to a state of indifference. Only the Genevan, C. G. Duvanel, a documentary film producer, who had made short films to order since the end of the silent film period, was able to continue with his work, whilst isolated initiatives such as those of Henry Brandt of Neuchâtel with the educational film *Quand nous étions petits enfants* (1961), announced the clear determination of a new generation: to try to show the country, through the camera, in its natural beauty, but also with its political and social contradictions and its historical idiosyncracies. Directly after the war, young students began to gather informa-

Scene from the movie «When we were small children» by Henry Brandt



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tion in film clubs (the Swiss Film Archive, daughter of the French Film Archive of Henri Langlois, was founded in Lausanne in 1948), with the intention of going on to make films of their own at the first opportunity.

This project appeared pointless because commercial film distributors showed no interest whatsoever in national production possibilities and the Confederation continued to ignore this sector, leaving it to the legislators in the Cantons to take care of. It took until 1958 for a constitutional article on this subject to be put to the people and to be accepted by them. It, at last, gave the Confederation the power to subsidize film productions and certain cultural institutions, such as the cinema archive, if only in a miserly way. A law was prepared. It came into effect in 1963.

At the same time, potential young cineasts reaped benefit from the help of television in learning their trade and in preparing their first feature films (starting with very small budgets, thanks to the improvements in sound recording and the possibilities of «blowing up» 16 mm to 35 mm). Brandt drew public interest to the Swiss cinema by the success of his films which he made for the 1964 National Exhibition in Lausanne. For this occasion, Alain Tanner shot *Les apprentis*; Michel Soutter joined the movement (*La lune avec les dents*, 1966), followed by Jean-Louis Roy: *L'inconnu de Shandigor*, (1967). Claude Goretta, established through his television dramas (*Chekhov* 1964, *Jean-Luc persécuté*, from Ramuz, 1965), went over to the cinema in 1970, without leaving the small screen, with *Le fou* (played by François Simon). Francis Reusser, Claude Champion, Jacques Sandoz and Yves Yersin, supported by Micheline and Freddy Landry, young and enthusiastic producers, made the single sketches for a film dedicated to the condition of woman at different times of life: *Quatre*



Pipe, the main character of Yves Yersin's movie «Les petites fugues».

d'entre elles (1968). The best presented and most moving of the sketches is perhaps that of Yersin, who speaks of old age in a euphoric, liberal society (*Angèle*). This subject was treated by Brandt in his turn, 10 years later, in his very beautiful feature film: *Le dernier printemps* (1977).

In Geneva on the eve of the seventies, inspired by the events of May 1968 in Paris, the «Group of Five» (Tanner, Soutter, Goretta, Roy and Lagrange who was replaced in 1970 by Yersin) was formed. This was a communal exploration of the problems involved in achieving the means of maximum freedom of expression in films. This fight was marked by the announced successes of a creative, dynamic movement: Soutter made *Haschisch* (1968), *La pomme* (1969), *James ou pas* (1970), Tanner, *Charles mort ou vif* (1969), Reusser, *Vive la mort* (1968), Roy *Black out* (1970). These percursory signs drew the attention of the international critics to the cinema of the Romanic part of Switzerland, and suddenly there came the triumph of Tanner's film *La Salamandre* (1971), then that of Soutter's *Arpenteurs* (1972), both warmly received at the Cannes Film Festival.

(To be continued)