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Switzerland doesn't exist" was the provocative motto of the Swiss pavilion at the 1992 world exhibition in Seville. Since then it has been quoted to the point of saturation. You could just as well say: "Swiss films don't exist". What indeed makes a film

Yvonne Lenzlinger *

into a Swiss film? The Swiss passport of the director? The fact that the production firm is Swiss? The Alpine panorama as background, or the fact that it is filmed somewhere in Switzerland? Swiss content? And what would that be in any case? Each criterion is quite right and at the same time quite wrong!

There is no TSF brand label standing for 'The Swiss Film'. But there do exist

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The favourite films of Ivo Kummer *



Clemens Klopfenstein, 'Geschichte der Nacht' (Stories of the Night), 1978
Alain Tanner, 'La salamandre' (Salamandre), 1972
Markus Imhof, 'Fluchtgefahr' (Risk of Escape), 1974
Richard Dindo, 'Die Erschiessung des Landesverrätters S.' (The Execution by Shooting of the Traitor, Ernst S.), 1975
Alain Tanner, 'Jonas qui aura 25 ans en l'an 2000' (Jonas Who Will Be 25 in the Year 2000), 1976
Kurt Gloor, 'Die plötzliche Einsamkeit des Konrad Steiner' (The Sudden Loneliness of Konrad Steiner), 1976
Patricia Moraz, 'Les Indiens sont encore loin' (The Indians are Still Far Away), 1977
Fred M. Murer, 'Grauzone' (Grey Area), 1979
Bruno Moll, 'Samba Lento' (Slow Samba), 1980
Christian Schocher, 'Reisende Krieger' (Travelling Warriors), 1981
Matthias von Gunten, 'Reisen ins Landesinnere' (Travels in the Interior of the Country), 1988

* Since 1987, Ivo Kummer has been head of the Soleure Film Festival, which is the main show-place of Swiss film production.

Swiss films covering a very wide range. Present annual production comprises about 20 long and 30 shorter feature films, as well as 30 documentaries each lasting at least half an hour. In addition, there are experimental, advertising and custom-made films having a commercial, educational or economic character. And another thing. The words 'film' and 'film creation' are anachronisms, since increasingly the good old celluloid is being displaced or supplemented by electronic picture and sound carriers. This means that today we hear much talk about audio-visual works.

Intellectual national defence

There was a time when the Swiss film existed with a vengeance. It was not official, but it was inscribed in the hearts of the public like the Swiss flag. That was during the Second World War, when films were part of our intellectual national defence. They remained so when the war became cold. Homeland was 'in', and it seems that it is still 'in', if we look at the titles offered to Swiss Abroad by a Canadian video rental house: 'Gilberte de Courgenay', 'Fusilier Wipf', 'Heidi', 'Uli the Farmboy' and 'The Leaseholder'. These embody the homeland. And here we come back to an old cliché – 'homeland' or 'Heimat' as in 'Heimatfilm' conjures up those soppy love stories about village girls falling for the forester's son – all in national costume – produced by our German-speaking neighbours.

But the Gotthelf films of Franz Schnyder and those about life in a small town in Canton Zurich featuring Emil Hegetschweiler – Kurt Früh's 'Bäckerei Zürrier' (The Zürrier Bakery) is a good example – have indeed got something of the traditional homeland film. Small cracks in the old model can already be seen in them, however. These started in the 1960s when France's 'Nouvelle Vague' (New Wave) swapped over first into French-speaking Switzerland and then farther east, making short shrift of homeland films as they used to be and giving place to the New Swiss Film. What remains of the old tradition is pre-

Swiss films win prizes and praise at festivals, but they are frequently ignored by the public.

cision and care in describing the environment in which films take place, the 'Heimat' or homeland of the protagonists, a sign of excellence for Swiss film products.

This is particularly true for documentary films, a genre which has greater difficulty in making the giant leap to the commercial big screen than feature films. But small studio cinemas in Switzerland are proving to be harder than those in foreign countries. They often include documentaries in their programmes and sometimes have considerable success with them. Hans Ulrich Schlumpf's 'Kongress der Pinguine' (Penguins Congress), for example, was seen by over 80,000 people, and this year 'Das Wissen vom Heilen' (The Knowledge of Healing), in which Franz Reichle examines the Tibetan art of healing, has been in cinema programmes for months. Abroad, however, the documentary films which today maintain the high reputation of films



Swiss film-makers sometimes retreat abroad for their productions. Peter von Gunten directed 'Pestalozzi's Berg' (Pestalozzi's Mountain) in Babelsberg, the 'Hollywood' of former East Germany. The late Gian-Maria Volonté played Pestalozzi. (Photo: Alice Baumann)

Swiss films yesterday and today

The homeland documented

from Switzerland are mostly shown only at festivals. There, amongst professionals, they are highly regarded and win prizes.

The most successful film?

What has been the most successful film by a Swiss director? That depends on how you judge success. The most tickets sold in Switzerland, a million more or less, were for Rolf Lyssy's 'Die Schweizermacher' (The Swissmakers), followed by 'Ein Schweizer namens Nötzli' (A Swiss called Nötzli) with Walter Roderer – although this was seen by only half as many people as the first. But if we go beyond our borders and judge according to presence at festivals and obtaining prizes, films like Fredi M. Murer's subtle drama, 'Höhenfeuer' (Alpine Fire), or the complete works of Alain Tanner, come out on top. An Oscar for the best non-English-language film was obtained by Xavier Koller for his 'Reise der Hoffnung' (Voyage of Hope) in 1991, the year in which Basle's Arthur Cohn was awarded his fifth gold statuette in Hollywood. But Cohn produces American films!

And what about women? Numerically there are enough of them. 'Cut',

the reference work for film and video makers in Switzerland, lists over 250 women in Switzerland's film world. These include experienced documentary film-makers like Reni Mertens and Jacqueline Veuve, as well as Gertrud Pinkus, Anne-Marie Miéville and Léa Pool, the last of whom works in Canada. There is also a promising new generation, which includes Nadia Fares, Anka Schmid and Pipilotti Rist. So far none of them has made a great hit with the public, but they frequently bring home film prizes.

The film industry is a very special cultural species in Switzerland. Unlike the other arts, it enjoys the direct patronage of the federal government. During the Cold War, Switzerland reached the conclusion from the use of films for propaganda purposes – Leni Riefenstahl in Hitler's Germany and Sergei Eisenstein in the Soviet Union are the two most striking examples which come to mind – that promotion of film production should be anchored in the constitution as a responsibility of the federal government. Voters agreed to this in 1958, although it was another four years before the required law was enacted.

In the first year after this came into force, the federal government spent Sfr. 600,000 on promoting films. It did not withdraw from the field in response to the New Swiss Film's provocation of the authorities. But in 1978 the Federal Council did refuse to finance a film

première for Richard Dindo's, 'Die Erschiessung des Landesverrätters Ernst S.' (The Execution by Shooting of the Traitor, Ernst S.) because it took a critical view of Switzerland's role in the Second World War. Years later, in 1994, a number of parliamentarians strongly criticised Federal Councillor Ruth Dreifuss because the Federal Office of Cultural Affairs, for which she is responsible, subsidised a film about Jean Ziegler.

In 1997, the federal government has budgeted just over Sfr. 21 million for film subsidies – as against, for example, Sfr. 450 million for the promotion of cheese exports. Cantonal and municipal authorities, as well as a number of public and private foundations, also help to support the country's film-makers. No one has ever worked out exactly what the film factor is worth to the Swiss economy, but it is not only complete film freaks who think that the country would be poorer without it. ■

The favourite films of Iris Brose *



Gisèle and Ernest Anserge, 'Les enfants de laine' (The Children of Wool), 1984
Jacqueline and Henry Brandt, 'Nous étions les rois du monde' (We were the Kings of the World), 1985
Roby Engler, 'Autoroute' (Motorway), 1986
Michel Etter, 'Martial, l'homme bus' (Martial, the Busman), 1983
Claude Goretta, 'L'invitation' (Invitation), 1973
Markus Imhof, 'Das Boot ist voll' (The Boat is Full), 1981
Claude Luyet, 'Question d'optiques' (A Question of Optics), 1986
Rolf Lyssy, 'Die Schweizermacher' (The Swissmakers), 1978
Fredi M. Murer, 'Höhenfeuer' (Alpine Fire), 1986
Daniel Schmid, 'Il bacio di Tosca' (Tosca Kiss), 1984
Marcel Schüpbach, 'L'allègement' (The Alleviation), 1983
Martial Wannaz, 'Trans enfance express' (Trans-Childhood's Express – wordplay on Trans-Europe Express) 1986, and 'Douce Nuit' (Sweet Night), 1987
Yves Yersin, 'Les petites fugues' (The Wild Oats), 1979

* Iris Brose was founder and from 1981 to 1988 director of the Vevey Festival of Film Comedy. She is now head of economic promotion for the city of Fribourg.