

Zeitschrift:	The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK
Herausgeber:	Federation of Swiss Societies in the United Kingdom
Band:	- (1974)
Heft:	1684
 Artikel:	The new Swiss film
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DOI:	https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-686512

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THE NEW SWISS FILM

by C. A. Truninger

The year 1962 can be considered the starting point of a new and independent Swiss cinema. Following a plebiscite, a law providing federal aid to film-makers greatly improved the conditions of film production. Since 1970, the State has increased its aid by awarding prizes for high-quality films and scenarios. This federal support was not an unmixed blessing, however. Although the one who pays the piper (in this case the government) does not explicitly call the tune, the Swiss film-maker is aware that it would behove him to treat the political content or implications of his work with a caution that is sometimes less than totally compatible with artistic freedom.

A case in point is that of Jurg Hassler, who in 1970 made the first full-length film dealing with contemporary Swiss political life, *KRAWALL*. It covered a youth revolt in Zurich which had been put down by the police. *KRAWALL* was quite unexpectedly shown on television and even won a government prize. However, his second film, even though it dealt with the relatively apolitical subject of apprenticeship, did not receive a television broadcast or any other recognition and Hassler is financially unable to continue working on films. His situation is quite representative of that of Swiss film-makers as a whole.

Unfortunately the Swiss film-maker has few, if any, financial sources besides the Government. Swiss films are sometimes shown on television or in special film forums or clubs, but very seldom in the ordinary cinema theatres because they do not find distributors.

In other words, there is only a limited possibility of attracting a large general audience to domestic films. Apart from a creature of purely theoretical existence, the independent and wealthy cineaste - Swiss film-makers are in an extremely difficult position. Once his film is completed, the producer/film-maker/director (often the same person) can only hope to sell it to television or win a government prize to recoup his investment. If these two avenues turn up as dead ends, he is forced to scramble for money on his own, like Jean-Luc Godard, to work outside Switzerland.

Despite these difficulties, there is an encouraging amount of film activity in the country. A national film festival, the *SOLOTHURNER FILMTAGE*, is held every February in Solothurn. The whole production of the past year is shown to the critics. This year there were 140 journalists, 20 of whom were from abroad, other film-makers, and the public.

In discussing trends in Swiss films, it is important to remember that the

Swiss cinema is divided into two sections, French and German. The German-language films have Zurich as their main centre of activity. Most of the Swiss-German films are either documentaries or experimental shorts. Themes of social unrest and agitation are fairly common, mirroring a somewhat typical "underground" world view. The French-language films, on the other hand, tend more toward feature-length dramas, and are somewhat less adventurously avant-garde.

Because of the Swiss-German film-makers' willingness to be highly experimental, a chronic shortage of funds is more the rule than the exception. Perhaps one of the most remarkable Swiss-German films of the last year is *TONIGHT OR NEVER* by Daniel Schmid, who studied in Berlin and worked with German director F.W. Fassbinder. With a budget of 20,000 dollars, Schmid shot a feature-length 16 mm colour film (blown up to 35 mm) which portrays bourgeois society as both ludicrous and detestable in a style highly reminiscent of Visconti. Despite favourable critical attention, financial success has been minimal to date. Of a cast and crew of 50, no one has been paid. There is however a chance that *TONIGHT OR NEVER* will be distributed in Great Britain.



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Another successful effort at breaking from purely documentary films was undertaken by Peter von Gunten. His film, *THE EXTRADITION*, shot in black and white, tells the story of the Russian revolutionary Njetschajew who was expelled in 1872 from Switzerland to Russia where he was put on trial for murder. For the first time in a Swiss-German feature-length film, Peter von Gunten engaged a star from abroad: the French actress Anne Wiazemsky, former wife of Jean-Luc Godard. The film has been shown with success in Switzerland, but has yet to be screened in France.

On the French-Swiss cinema scene, perhaps the most interesting phenomenon is Group Five. Some years ago,

French-Swiss television decided to support the production of feature films, acting as co-producer, which led to the formation of Group Five. The most prominent of this Group are TANNER, SOUTTER and GORETTA, whose film *L'INVITATION* won a prize at the Film Festival in Cannes 1973. The film was much talked of in London as well. The group is not itself a production unit with its own financial management but operates as a pooling agency which affords a common legal base to the five participating film-makers. They retain full economic autonomy and individually assume all the risks of their production. Within the Group Five framework, each has complete independence. The best-known film-maker of this group is

Alain Tanner. With his film *LA SALAMANDRE* (shot in 35 mm on a 50,000 dollar budget), Tanner became the first Swiss film-maker who was able to gain an international reputation while staying in his native country. Of course, Group Five benefits only five film-makers. Many others have been unable to find a place for their work in the small television market.

Apart from the perennial problem of financing, the severely limited domestic market is the chief handicap of Swiss films. If independent film-making is to continue to grow in Switzerland the film-makers must set their sights beyond the admiration of a small "in-group" and try to gain the confidence of the general audience.



Scene from "The Extradition" (by courtesy of Barbera Bernet, Lucerne).



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