

Swiss spotlight

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SWISS SPOTLIGHT.

By PIERRE BÉGUIN.

The showing of three foreign films has been prohibited recently, either in certain cantons, or in the whole of Switzerland. The French film, "The Tricksters", was prohibited in the canton of Vaud; the objection to this film is that it is demoralising, in that it shows the youth of our age, as being more or less amoral. On the other hand, the American film, "The Paths to Glory", was prohibited throughout Switzerland by the Federal Government; this film, which stigmatises certain methods in use in all the armies of the world, was considered to be particularly offensive in regard to the French Army, and it was in order that relations of our country with France should not be troubled, that the Swiss Government forbade its being shown. Finally, a German film was prohibited, quite recently, in Zurich. The motive for this prohibition was that Veit Harlan, the producer of the banned film, was known to have put himself, before the last war, at the service of the Nazi anti-Semitic propaganda, more especially in a satirical film, entitled "Jew Süss". To be exact, in the case of Zurich, it should be added that the authorities forbade the showing of Veit Harlan's film as a result of popular manifestations directed against the personality of the producer.

These prohibitions have given rise to very lively discussions, and have led to the problem of censorship — as it exists at present in our country.

The Swiss, who are deeply attached to freedom of opinion and of expression, are spontaneously hostile to every form of censorship. Introduced during the Second World War, censorship now exists solely in regard to the cinema.

In Switzerland to-day no authority can exercise any censorship on the Press or on theatrical performances. It is true, of course, that the police authorities can take measures against licentious publications. That is an understood thing, and nobody would think of taking umbrage in this connection; but it is not possible for an issue of a paper to be seized, or for a theatrical performance to be prohibited, unless constituting a threat to the good relations existing between Switzerland and other countries. On the very rare occasions when it does intervene, the Federal Government bases its decision on an Article of the Constitution which lays upon it the duty of watching over the safety of the State.

Censorship, then, only exists in the domain of the cinema. On the one hand, the Federal Government can prohibit the showing of a film which threatens to compromise our relations with foreign countries. On the other, all the cantons have set up Censorship Commissions, charged with the task of defending public morals. Moreover, the cantons can always prohibit the showing of a film which is liable to provoke disorder.

One may well ask why it is that the cinema is subjected to a much more rigorous control than are other forms of expression. The official thesis consists in saying that the cinema exercises a far greater spell than can ever be achieved by a book or the theatre, and that, furthermore, access to these dark auditoriums is so cheap that they are frequented by the masses, that is to say, by that section of the population — including the youth of the country — which is the least prepared to exercise its critical faculties.

The opponents of this official thesis think, for their part, that, on the contrary, the entire problem of censorship of the cinema is an educational one. The education provided by both the schools and the family should be of such a nature as to make it possible for the great majority of our fellow-citizens to resist certain influences. It is far better to propagate an education possessing a sufficient value, than to be obliged to protect people from their own weaknesses.

Such are the ideas that have been expressed here in regard to the afore-mentioned prohibitions. Public opinion as a whole has affirmed that everyone should be capable of judging a film for himself. This point of view may perhaps be somewhat idealistic, but it is a healthy one, for a nation should not be placed permanently under the paternal protection of its authorities, either politically or morally. Besides, protection of this kind might lead to still worse arbitrary measures, for, however well-intentioned it may be, censorship always reaches the point where it considers that it is an end in itself.

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