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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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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 Leeseholder'. These embody the homeland. And here we come back to an old cliché - 'homeland' or 'Heimat' as in 'Heimattfilm' 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 Zürcher' (The Zürcher 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 yesterday and today

The homeland documented

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

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
- Fredi M. Murer, 'Grazone' (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 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)

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 Pipiloti 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 Sergej 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

The favourite films of Iris Brose*



- Gisèle and Ernest Ansoerg, '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, 'Autour' (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'allegement' (The Alleviation), 1983
- Martial Wanzar, '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.