

# VIEWS AND PERSPECTIVES: STUDIES ON THE HISTORY OF NON-FICTION FILM IN SWITZERLAND TO 1964

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*Views and Perspectives* is a two-year research project on the history of non-fiction film in Switzerland to 1964, conducted by the Film Studies Department of the University of Zurich in collaboration with the Cinémathèque Suisse and other partners, and funded by the Swiss National Fund for Research. The project is composed of three parts, covering the production of tourist films, the production of industrial films and the distribution of educational films in Switzerland respectively.

Despite the fact that non-fiction and documentary films represented the majority of film production in Switzerland for the most part of the medium's history, relatively little scholarly attention has been devoted to these films, mostly because film historians chose to focus on the history of fiction film instead. *Views and Perspectives* proposes to contribute towards a closing of this gap by establishing an extensive database of archival holdings of non-fiction films in the Cinémathèque Suisse and other Swiss film archives. Furthermore, the project intends to trace the non-fiction film's history through film analysis of large groups of examples as well as through research into the history of important production companies and their relationships with commissioning industries, such as the tourist, the food and the machine industries. By thus mapping some of the non-fiction film's most important aspects in terms of style, production, distribution and exhibition, *Views and Perspectives* proposes to lay the foundations for further research into the history of documentary and utility films in Switzerland as well as in a transnational perspective.

The research covers the period from 1896 to 1964. 1896 is the year of the first officially recorded public showing of a film in Switzerland, while 1964 is generally marked out in film history text books as the year in which the "New Swiss Film" took off with the production of such films as Alexander Seiler's documentary on Italian labor immigration, *Siamo italiani*. *Views and Perspectives* includes films from all parts of the country and from all *genres* of non-fiction film, from travelogues to the *Kulturfilm* and other educational formats to the industrial film. The project's main focus, however, is on the genres that are the most significant in terms of the quantity of output, as well as on the genres that are the most significant in terms of the media representation of Switzerland for domestic as well as foreign audiences.

It is according to these two criteria – quantity of output and representational function – that we have decided to devote the two main parts of the project to the tourist film and

industrial film respectively. Part 3 of the project, which mainly covers the history of the Swiss Educational Film Service (“Schweizerisches Schüle und Volkskino”), was chosen in view of a general history of the distribution and exhibition of non-fiction films in Switzerland, but also because of the fact that Switzerland played a pioneering role in the use of the film medium for educational purposes.

Part 1 of the project, conducted by Pierre-Emmanuel Jaques, is devoted to *travel and tourist films* and covers films from the quasi-ethnographic and “view” films shot by foreign companies in Switzerland in the early days of the medium to domestic documentaries with folkloristic subject matter from the early sixties. Starting with an analysis of the representational strategies with which the commissioning tourist agencies and hotel industries sought to attract tourist patronage through films, this part of the project focuses on the representation of Switzerland in documentary films. In the process of becoming a modern nation-state in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Switzerland established a national iconography in which the countryside and particularly the mountain regions play a crucial role. Based on a formal analysis of a representative sample of films, this part of the project proposes to draw up an inventory of stereotypical images that constitute the Swiss national iconography in documentary film. Most significantly, while the majority of the films under discussion tend to foreground traditional aspects of Switzerland’s image, many films operate with contrasting and sometimes even conflicting paradigms, bringing together rural traditions with elements of modernization, such as transportation and industrial production. In addition, a study of press releases and reviews will probe into the historical reception of these films and their iconography by both domestic and foreign audiences.

Part 2 of the project, conducted by Yvonne Zimmermann, focuses on *industrial films* from two key Swiss industries: The food and the engineering industries. This part of the project proposes to study both the representation of individual companies and of entire industries through films. Despite its image as a rural and alpine nation, Switzerland was the earliest country in the European continent to be fully industrialized. Industrial films constitute an important genre of the non-fiction film because they significantly contribute toward the construction of Switzerland’s image both abroad and at home. While industrial films aimed at foreign audiences foreground the potential for innovation of Swiss industries and attempt to reassure prospective buyers of Swiss products and merchandise about the standards of quality applied in industrial production in Switzerland, films aimed at domestic audiences mostly attempt to negotiate conflicts between traditional lifestyles and technological progress, or between economic crises and models of prosperity. It is particularly interesting to study how industrial films aimed at domestic audiences respond to contemporary public discourse in their representation of particular industries and their products. Again, this part of the project focuses primarily on formal analysis, but proposes to study the distribution and reception of the films under discussion as well.

Part 3 of the project, conducted by Anita Gertiser, focuses on *educational and school films* and reconstructs the history of the Swiss educational film service, the “Schweizerisches Schüle und Volkskino.” Starting with the movement against “trash” films and their harmful effects on the youth, this part of the project traces the debates

about film censorship and reform in Switzerland from the teens through the fifties. Early on, the reformers recognized the educational value of the film medium. This led to the foundation of the “Schweizerisches Schüle und Volkskino” in 1921, an educational film service devoted to the distribution of films deemed educationally valuable to schools and other non-theatrical exhibition venues. In just a few years, the “Schüle und Volkskino” built up an efficient national distribution network that provided even remote villages in alpine regions with “good” films. Apart from distribution, the “Schüle und Volkskino” was also involved in the traveling exhibition of film and in the co-production and production of films for its own purposes. While part 3 of the project mainly reconstructs the institutional history of the “Schüle und Volkskino,” it also proposes to establish the criteria of what constitutes a “good” film at various stages in the institution’s development through a discourse analysis of press texts, memos and other archival documents.

While parts 1 and 2 of the project are post-doctoral research projects, Anita Gertiser conducts her part of the research as her Ph.D. work.

## Presentation of the Results

The results of this research project will be made accessible in the form of a multi-part anthology in book form, to be published in 2005. Along with contributions from the researchers on their individual projects, this anthology will include a selection of additional contributions on specific theoretical and historical questions relevant to the project.

Furthermore, the results of this research project are to be presented in the form of papers and articles at conferences and in journal publications.

Finally, the films themselves will be made available to a larger audience through film programs and, hopefully, on a critically edited DVD along with the book publication.

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