

Beyond The Chocolate Mountains

Around the world, Switzerland is best known for its watches, cheese and chocolate, its banks, precise train networks and picturesque mountain views. And yet, even the briefest glimpse at Swiss cinema defies these clichés. Since the Swiss new wave of the 1960s and 70s – the "New Swiss Cinema" of Alain Tanner and his colleagues – filmmakers have chosen to go beyond tourist stereotypes to focus mainly on the stories, problems and heroes of everyday life. Perhaps surprisingly to outsiders, Swiss films often take a critical look, or even poke fun, at the very clichés by which the country is known abroad: the bankers, railways and rustics, the tendency toward precision and old-fashioned ways.

Today, when filmmakers have access to influences from around the globe, we can no longer speak of national cinemas as distinct styles or traditions, like German Expressionism, Italian neorealism, Hong Kong action movies or Bollywood musicals. And in fact, Swiss directors, like directors everywhere, borrow freely from these and other genres. At the same time, small Switzerland is divided by language and geography into many smaller regions – so that French-speaking filmmakers from Geneva or Lausanne may not seem to have anything in common with their German-speaking counterparts from Zurich and Berne, or their Italian-speaking colleagues from the south side of the Alps.

So what is it, then, that makes Swiss cinema distinct? Perhaps because of the role the mountains have traditionally played in Swiss culture, films often focus on the importance of the landscape. Even stories set in urban areas – the bustling cities or the grey concrete suburbs – insist on linking the characters and their destinies with their surroundings. Another clear motif is the emphasis on subtle details of everyday life. A decades-long tradition of documentary film seems to have given Swiss directors a sharp eye for authentic moments and gestures, and a sympathy for human dilemmas.

Each of the films selected by the Tofifest handles these elements in its own unique way. Some of them take explicitly Swiss subjects as their theme; others tell stories designed to seem universal. Taken together, they provide a sometimes playful, sometimes serious look at the world "beyond the chocolate mountains".

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