

The voices of Swiss Cinéma du Réel
by Jean Perret*

According to tradition, Swiss cinema has assured the legitimacy of its existence owing in particular to the documentary of independent production. Can thus the documentary be considered an excellence trademark in a film industry that is struggling – just like contemporary cinema in general – to make up unifying stories, innovative writing, visions connected to the world and its doubts, its convictions, and expectations? No need to stir controversy, or to simplify the terms of reflection. It's still true, though, that Switzerland remains one of the exemplary platforms for production in Europe, at least for three reasons.

The first reason has to do with a cultural policy that has been developed by public authorities on the federal, regional, and cantonal levels. This consists in funding productions, at times to a substantial extent, thus becoming an essential partner in the film production scene. Mention should also be made that State TVs – one per linguistic region – take part in this strategy in the framework of an Audiovisual Agreement. Of course, professionals always wish for access to more means and better allocation criteria! In this sector, represented by several associations (there are three producers' associations now!), there is a lively debate going on as regards the outlining of a new regime of promotion that should be in force from 2012. It is also true that, in Europe, Switzerland ostensibly belongs to those few countries that are deeply engaged in supporting television and video industry, a business whose future can only be on a European and international level in the broadest sense – especially as far as a tiny territory as Switzerland's is concerned. As a consequence, strategies should be more ambitious and better financed.

The second reason has to do with Swiss cinema itself, whose identity was shaped in the 1930's when there were just as many documentaries produced as features. Further factors have been history and politics, e.g. WWII, the economic boom in the 1950's and 60's, and later on decades of prosperity marked by ideological and existential anxiety. Finally, the end of the millennium and the beginning of the 23rd century have been prey to deep crises in society. From a cinema devoted to social criticism, radical points of view, protest against conventional, if not 'bourgeois,' values, audiences have been referred towards more intimate stories that witness doubtfulness, uncertainty, a general disarray, combined with corroborating impertinence, healthy humour, and local memory...

Thirdly, Swiss documentary cinema, a «creative cinéma du réel», in more than 25 years has gone through a spectacular evolution that displays an impassioned diversity in genres, writing, points of view, and vision... Swiss cinema has totally been in tune with the different periods it went through, marking them with peculiar stories. Is it still necessary to state that this cinema has nothing to do anymore with the conventional, dusty definition of documentary, and that it has positively emancipated itself, and become film in its own right? In subtle forms of hybridation, which have incorporated the know-hows coming from fiction (that had already been exposed to the invigorating influence of the documentary act) this cinema is part and parcel of movie theatres' and TV's general offer – with a few distinctions, of course. Such diversity and heterogeneity are now well-established.

The programme will show eleven films that weigh up Swiss cinema, outlining a geography made of political films, travel films, and films with a social or intimist approach. Sustained by inspired and committed signatures, each of these works actually contains one or all of these dimensions, and contribute to make rigid boundaries between themes, genres, and aesthetics obsolete.

Zero. *Premier jour*. Every screening will open with one of the ten First days by Fernand Melgar. These are exemplary shorts: one-day shooting, one camera, no location scouting, no preliminary meetings with the characters, no script and no adapting for the

screen. Direct Cinema tuned into a 'first time' in someone's life, describing its subtle complexity and fullness in 7-8 minutes.

One. *Siamo italiani*. More than 45 years ago labour was imported from Italy into Switzerland, in order to meet the latter's needs in terms of on-going economic boom and thriving prosperity. Alexander Seiler's pictures in black and white make up an impressive record of these mass migrations, where men in voluntary exile went seeking an acknowledgment. One of the founding films of the new Swiss cinema of the 1960's.

Two. *Pas les flics, pas les blancs, pas les noirs*. Geneva, a cosmopolitan city, counts almost 40% of foreigners among its population. Daily life requires special and innovative attentions to foil xenophobic, if not racist attitudes. Ursula Meier went in the field, met the people, and created a texture of words. A policeman became one of the leading characters. He wears himself out trying to create social ties through mediation. There lies the film's modernity, in standing by mediation rather than condemnation.

Three. *Le génie helvétique*. Or, Helvetic democracy's mysteries as they play out in federal commissions. Jean-Stéphane Bron goes to Bern, the capital city, where's there's nothing to see! It may be worth mentioning that Parliament sessions are not public. Therefore the film-maker will meet his characters in the ante-rooms of power and create suspense this way. His characters will have to repeat their own words on this 'stage,' the only way to get closer to the truth of the stakes.

Four. *Genet à Chatila*. A text by Jean Genet makes the basis for Richard Dindo's journey on the tracks of the 1982 massacres in the Sabra and Shatila camps in West Beirut. At the same time, the film-maker created a portrait of a writer engaged in exposing unspeakable horror. He staged a young woman to tread on these haunted territories. The story's threads lie at the heart of a cinema whose legitimacy is rooted in the duty to remember and condemn history's violence.

Five. *Les hommes du port*. Alain Tanner made a collective portrait, representing the men working at the port of Genoa with whom he used be in close contact as a young man in the late 1940's. The film's protagonist is the workers' memory, among past fights, the dignity of jobs facing extinction, technology evolution (the containers' era!), and financial crisis. Cinema still is a matter of memory, the film-maker's memory combined with that of the workers he talks to, suspended between yesterday and tomorrow.

Six. *War Photographer*. How to account for the world's misery, its violence, and paradoxical greatness? Which work should tackle such a task? Christian Frei decided to follow closely war photographer James Nachtway in the field. Then he tried to understand how the picture trade in editorial offices and museums works. The film represents his main character as a disenchanted hero, but it takes a stand in favour of his humanity and that of the photographed people. A reflection is thus needed regarding the necessity – or not – of images of reality.

Seven. *Il bacio di Tosca*. Great portraits of the artist are made by great artists carrying within themselves the nostalgia for those figures who inspire their work. Daniel Schmid belongs to the opera, that world where you listen moved by lyrical voices and are aware that only film can preserve a fragile, evanescent memory. As if he were a ghost, the film-maker explores the rest-home founded by Verdi. He meets more ghosts with cracked voices, whose tones and gestures still witness past glories.

Eight. *Face Addict*. Another ghostly presence, this time in New York. He devoted a film to the late 1970's-early 80's downtown scene of artistic creation. He knew it well, including figures like Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring, John Lurie... Edo Bertoglio searched his personal archives and exhumed the images of a story that takes on the quality of a personal diary. Yesterday's records and today's words exorcize an

exhilarating, mortally dangerous period. Drugs and AIDS took a terrible toll, and the film sets out to keep alive the memory of the dead among the living.

Nine. *Middle of the Moment*. Far from the city's racket, far from mankind's turbulent history, film remains in search of what creates the in-between, the Middle of a Moment, of silence, of a meaning for existence. Werner Penzel and Nicolas Humbert are film-makers devoted to contemplative observation and inspired observation. At times they even freeze in order to capture the muffled palpitation of the right moment. The subtlest film techniques are used in order to let a miracle, maybe, happen: the gaze and the real interlocking.

Ten. *Geschichte der Nacht*. A city made of many cities, whose architectures are enveloped in darkness, at times pierced by night lights. Clemens Klopfenstein made a movie as if he were a solitary stroller who reinvents film and its poetic potential to unravel universes departing from fragments snatched from the dark. The sound track is just as precious, adding to the atmosphere of revelry for its audience plunged in the darkness of the movie theatre. Once again, film is populated by ghosts chased by a sleepwalking film-maker.

Eleven. *Requiem*. In short, the memory of the last century. There isn't a soul alive in these military graveyards, only the memory of thousands of soldiers who died on the field of honour. Rigorous composition, perfect editing rhythms, and the dialectics between the music score and the pictures: according to the film-makers Reni Mertens and Walter Marti, the cinema has been and will forever be universal conscience.

* Director of Visions du Réel – Nyon International Film Festival

From September 2010, Director of Film/Cinéma du Réel Department at the HEAD – Haute Ecole d'Art et de Design de Genève (Geneva University of Art and Design)