

STYLE IN SWISS NEWSREELS 1940-1945

PETER GERDES

University of New South Wales, Australia

HEIMAT

There exists an unique word in the German language, particularly as it is spoken and written in Switzerland: «Heimatstil», «Heimat style». The word «Heimat» is not translatable. It means something akin to «fatherland» or «motherland» but implies much more and is full of emotional overtones, if not outright sentimentalism. It implies mountains, the rustic life, the back-to-earth syndrome. «Heimatstil» indicates a style stemming from the basic and morally solid pleasures in life: carved furniture made from native fir-trees, highly decorated traditional costumes, the classical chalet and yodelling. «Heimat» and anything that goes with it is particularly called upon - and popular - during moments of crisis. It helps to mentally strengthen the readiness for national resistance, Switzerland likes to promote the reflection on «Heimat» which, according to Paul Nizon, «expresses itself with preference in any form of 'Heimatstil'»¹. It is worthwhile noting that Germany and Austria know of the «Heimatstil» as well but not so France or Italy.

«Heimatstil» would seem to contradict to some extent the Swiss character, its cleanliness, frugality, rationality, pragmatism. Out of the conflict between the rational realisation that Switzerland had to do something to combat foreign propaganda in the cinemas and the assumption that an appeal to the «Heimat» and what it stands for would work best grew the Schweizer Filmwochenschau, the Ciné Journal Suisse, the Cine Giornale Svizzero (note the stress on «Swiss» and «film» implying a solidly Swiss filmic journal)². Throughout its history but particularly during the war CJS struggled not only for its existence but more importantly for a clear definition of purpose; it continuously searched for aims and objectives. And because it struggled so much at the conceptual level it found it difficult to develop its own clearly defined style.

NEWSREELS AND STYLE

Did newsreels ever have a «style»? As far as I am aware - and I hope I shall be corrected - no one has ever talked about it. Newsreels seem to have a «purpose» (inform and entertain; make money) and a «format» (disasters, politics, entertainment and sport)³ and, leading up to and during wartime, a «task» (propaganda). One reason why it might be difficult to talk about style in newsreels is the fact that they are the result

of a collaborative effort combining newspaper journalism (the search for facts) and film techniques (the need for a certain amount of creativity, the re-structuring of reality) with the need to produce a popular commodity which can be sold. One would assume that this makes it almost impossible to point towards an individual of whom it could be said that he (there are no shes) left his stylistic mark on a number of newsreels. The «auteur» theory as we know it from traditional film theory would seem to be even harder to apply to newsreels than to other films. Perhaps one can notice stylistic differences between production companies but I have not heard of such comparisons. Leaving aside political content one may wonder whether German newsreels made during the war were so much different from American or Italian or British newsreels⁴.

In previous studies I have looked at the content of CJS and how the company tried to develop a newsreel concept whilst remaining neutral in its outlook at the same time⁵. Now I shall try to establish whether CJS had its own «style» and, if so, whether any one person could be considered responsible for it. I studied the issues produced between 1940 and the end of 1945, noted who according to the «stock diary» was the cameraman responsible for the filming and analysed the stories according to their visual qualities. (CJS kept a diary noting name of story, cameraman, footage exposed and footage used in final cut.) I also made use of the protocols of the Board of CJS and whatever correspondence is still available. This is research in progress. More details might become available and some aspects might have to be re-interpreted in the future⁶.

CAMERA FOR STYLE

I have come to the conclusion that the most influential person at CJS during the war as far as visual style is concerned was the so-called «chef opérateur» Georges Alexath. The «editor-in-chief» of CJS, Paul Ladame, was responsible for the selection of the stories and commentaries, but Alexath's images and his editing shaped the style of CJS.

Georges Alexath (1910-1979) was born in Moscow. His Russian father and Swiss mother fled during the revolution and settled in 1922 in Switzerland. In 1930 Alexath began work as cameraman with the first Swiss Newsreel Company in Geneva which closed in 1934. He worked as a still photographer on a French-Swiss feature film coproduction in 1933, then as cameraman on another coproduction in 1934⁷. Alexath admired the Soviet filmmakers but politically stood to the far right⁸.

Paul Alexis Ladame had studied history and graphic arts in Berlin and there worked in film. He became a journalist with the Swiss News Agency before joining CJS which he left in 1944, after a long struggle with the Board, mainly because of choice of stories, his «style» (for the Board, Ladame was responsible for the «look» of CJS) and overrunning of budgets. (The most frequent complaint by the Board was that the commentary was «unsatisfactory», that he explained what was clearly visible on the

screen, that the preparation of the stories was «insufficient» and that the style of CJS resembled too much the one of a weekly newsmagazine).

In September 1944, a new editor-in-chief was appointed, Hans Laemmel, and from then on until his retirement at CJS in 1961, it was Laemmel, former film critic and journalist, who left a distinct stylistic mark on CJS. He argued vehemently with Alexath about his filmic style and Alexath had to leave in 1949. According to Laemmel one could only begin to make «real» newsreels after Alexath had left because of his demands for long stories and epic images; he called him «maître imagiers», a «preacher of pathos», who could shoot beautiful images but had no feeling for the limitations within which the Swiss operate and think?

WHAT IF NOT PROPAGANDA?

When CJS was founded, no one really knew what its aims and objectives should be. It was created in 1940 as part of what was called «Geistige Landesverteidigung» («spiritual defence of the country») and it was expected to help counteract the propaganda as seen on the screens around the country. Like so often in Switzerland, there was a feeling that one ought to do «something» but that this «something» should not cost too much. The Board of CJS itself was a typical Swiss compromise with members who had little experience in matters journalistic and filmic.

Switzerland did have a tradition of filmmaking and leading up to 1940 a number of Swiss films, parochial but nevertheless relatively well-made, had been produced. This and the fact that Switzerland was a good market for foreign distributors enabled the existence of two film laboratories, one in Zürich and one in Geneva. For political reasons, CJS had to get its headquarters in Geneva at the most far-flung corner of the country.

Switzerland had excellent newspapers and many editors with high profiles but it had no tradition of newsreels. Again for political reasons, a French-speaking Swiss with limited experience as journalist and little as filmmaker was chosen to become editor-in-chief. He assembled around him a crew consisting of a producer who later became a leading film director, Kurt Früh, a chief cameraman with some newsreel and feature film experience and an enthusiasm for the classical Soviet film directors, Georges Alexath¹⁰ and, from 1941, a locally trained operator, Robert Garbade¹¹. There was a music editor, a secretary, an accountant, an office boy, a secretary for the distribution and the occasional freelance cameraman. At the end of 1940, René Boeniger joined CJS as regular freelancer¹².

So, when it all began

- the aim was only vaguely defined
- finance was extremely limited
- headquarters were far from the centre of action

- the editor-in-chief had little experience in either journalism or filmmaking
- staff was minimal and had limited experience in newsreel work.

On top of those obstacles, CJS had to fight censorship and had to overcome serious transportation problems. As far as content was concerned, it was supposed to reflect life in Switzerland and to uplift general moral (the «spiritual self-defence») but had to remain strictly neutral, in short, it was forced to be everything a newsreel of the time was not: quiet, unexciting, placid, undramatic and non-polemic. Indeed, when Garbade happened to get involved in the liberation of Northern Italy, got stranded there and eventually brought back some remarkable footage, he was sincerely reprimanded, almost sacked, for shooting 2000 meters of film and incurring expenses¹³.

IN SEARCH OF STYLE

Some of the first stories filmed remind one of Méliès early films: issue No.1 (August 1, 1940, Swiss National Day) contains five stories:

1. Parade of refugees
2. Camp with interned soldiers
3. Look at an IRC agency responsible for POWs
4. Declaration by the President of the IRC
5. Explosion in a quarry.

With the exception of 1/4, all items could have been shown in 1895 in Paris. There is no visual structure and minimal editing, the commentary explains the obvious. And the declaration is presented in a way as if sound cameras had only just been invented. 1/1, 1/2 and 1/5 were filmed by Alexath, 1/3 and 1/4 by Masset, owner of Cinégram, the laboratory in which premises CJS was housed and who had founded the first Swiss Newsreel Company.

For the first few weeks, Alexath was obviously trying to find his way and filming stories to fill issue after issue did not allow him to care about style. Rushing around the country by train and occasionally by car trying to film sport events with one camera, watching out for off-limits areas, looking after his own equipment, left little time to carefully compose shots. This changed, when Garbade joined the crew. In order to fill the programme, some stories were filmed by freelancers, some were bought from commercial film companies.

A continuous shortage of raw film forced the cameramen to shoot on very low ratios. 7.6 (containing sync. material) and 6.9 (mountain climbing with the army) are two exceptions, the average range reaching from 1.8 to 3.2. Particularly one-story issues

(Alexath's «feature newsreels») are shot on very low ratios: time taken in preparing the shoot saved film.

CJS presented 768 stories between 1940 and the end of 1945 including one story issues and those acquired from the outside. Alexath shot 207 by himself, Garbade 246. Together they worked on 56. Alexath and others on 20, Garbade and others on 15. Freelancers and stories bought made up another 224 stories. Although Garbade seems to have been involved in more shoots (307) than Alexath (283), we must assume that Alexath imposed much of his ideas since he was the «chief operator» and Garbade the «assistant». Moreover, Alexath did his own editing and later even wanted to take over responsibility for the selection of music, i.e., he strived for what we call today an «auteur» approach¹⁴. According to Laemmel, Alexath could not resist making newsreel films «on a grand scale», shooting a lot of footage, «creating beautiful images» which proved to be useless to carry on a brief story. Because of Alexath's generosity to himself, there remained little money for «ordinary» newsreel stories which quite often Garbade had to shoot with limited stock whilst Alexath was indulging¹⁵.

Alexath's style is epic, lingering, slow. Although the average shot-length for ordinary news items is around 3 to 5 seconds, each story contains long-held shots. In one-story issues, the average shot length goes up to 8.9 seconds (Nr. 145). But even such banal items (considered «bad» by the Board) as skiing (Nr. 127) have an average length of 6 seconds. He chooses his angles very carefully, loves slow and long pans (they can take up to 1 minute [Nr. 145]) and takes great care with lighting. He uses close-ups to great effect unlike Garbade who stuck more to wide and mid-shots. The editing is slow unless a particular montage sequence demands fast cutting. A considerable number of issues begin with long printed texts over the first shot and contain superimpositions¹⁶. Alexath loves to film beautifully lit machines, highlighting their abstract beauty. From the start, he uses strong filters in order to create contrasts, particularly when filming landscapes with clouds. It would seem that he was most unhappy when he had to shoot fast moving events for which there was little time for preparation, such as sports or indoor scenes where there was little time for elaborate lighting.

Alexath was officially not responsible for the music. Music, like the commentaries by Ladame, which in their textual and audio quality quite often came close to their German counterparts, is often overpowering, and most of it explanatory to what is shown already. Stereotypes and clichés abound. Apart from the usual military marches, composers such as Tchaikovsky, Rimsky-Korsakoff, Mussorgsky were great favourites, followed by Saint-Saëns, Debussy and Strauss¹⁷.

In one-story issues it becomes fairly obvious that the overall style of CJS lingers between an imitation of the classical Soviet filmmakers and the stylistic approach used by German filmmakers in their propaganda films. Part Eisenstein, part Riefenstahl but in rhythm and speed slowed down to Swiss heaviness¹⁸.

One has to keep in mind that there are not many different ways in which activities of the army can be filmed. Whether soldiers are filmed fighting or, as in Switzerland, preparing for a fight, the duty of the newsreel cameraman is to turn them into heroes. Soldiers in CJS appear not very heroic at all (serious and intent, yes, but then the audience knew that they were not fighting) but they do appear very aware of the camera and hence give more of a «performance». A special case is the one-issue story on General Guisan, leader of the Swiss army. An attempt is made to show him as a man of the people but it succeeds as little as did similar attempts at showing Hitler or American generals men of the people.

The Board had, according to the minutes, more arguments with Ladame than with Alexath but a letter written by Laemmel to Alexath on December 28, 1944, gives a good indication as to Alexath's approach to filming.

Laemmel praises Alexath for his work but asks him to «make more intensive documentary films instead of seeking for more extensive topics and scenes... I would like you to film with a sense of discrimination and for nuances - Cavalcanti rather than Ford, English rather than Russian school.» Obviously, Alexath's intensely emotional approach to filmmaking did little to endear him to the Swiss concept of sobriety and it was certainly not an approach common to newsreel cameramen in other countries. Alexath was conscious of the fact that he was appreciated as an excellent cameraman. He had also his network of contacts throughout the country, he had experience and hence was almost invaluable. What upset the Board was his style which he cultivated uncontrolled since he was either filming on his own or with an assistant - and later even edited the material himself. Ladame seemed to be too inexperienced or weak to challenge Alexath.

Style did change to some extent when Laemmel took over as editor-in-chief although he, too, had only limited influence on the photography. However, Laemmel used considerably less (and certainly less pathetic) music, kept his commentaries shorter and spoke them slower.

The style of CJS during World War II was the result of experimentation with a new medium. A well-meaning and hard-working amateur (as far as newsreels were concerned) selected stories and wrote the commentaries and a qualified professional oversaw the production of visuals and the editing. CJS became stylistically a Swiss mix of Soviet and German filmmaking with a strong epic feeling. In this it was the product of classical Swiss compromises and reflected the concept of «spiritual defence of the country» but they certainly contrasted strongly with imported hard-hitting and propagandistic newsreels.

NOTES AND REFERENCES:

- (1) See Nizon (1990) 230.
- (2) From here on CJS.

- (3) Enzensberger in "Scherbenwelt. Anatomie einer Wochenschau" gives the most original type of categorisation. See Enzensberger (1964) 106.
- (4) Gerd Albrecht has analyzed in great detail UFA-Tonwoche 451/1939 "Hitler's 50th birthday" but does not speak of a specific "style". He stresses the purpose of this newsreel. See Moltmann/Reimers (1970) 25.
- (5) See "'Ciné-Journal Suisse' and Neutrality, 1940-1945", **Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television**, Vol. 5, No. 1 (1985); and "Swiss Newsreel - 1945", **Hitler's Fall. The Newsreel Witness**, ed. Short and Dolezel (1988) 100.
- (6) After the demise of CJS, all documents were handed over to Swiss Federal Archives. However, there is little material available relating to the persons who worked with CJS. The editors-in-chief of the period 1940 to 1961, Ladame and Laemmel, kept personal diaries which are not accessible.
- (7) See Dumont (1987) 167, Gasser (1978) 65.
- (8) Interview with Laemmel, November, 1990.
- (9) Interview Laemmel.
- (10) One of the most famous Swiss directors of the time, Valérien Schmidely, was also born in Russia and worked with Eisenstein, Dovchenko, Kozintsev and Trauberg before returning to Switzerland in 1930. See Dumont (1987).
- (11) After his departure from CJS, Garbade worked mainly as camera assistant in advertising and short film productions. Laemmel thought of him as an excellent newsreel cameraman.
- (12) Born in 1916, he worked from 1936 onwards as cameraman in Berlin and Paris. From 1940 onwards he was assistant cameraman on many Swiss feature films and in 1956 founded a film company with Alexath.
- (13) The result was one of the best issues, No. 251 of August 31, 1945.
- (14) See minutes of the Board June 16, 1945.
- (15) Unfortunately, no dubsheets can be found. Laemmel says that he had insisted on detailed dubsheets. It is possible that they were thrown out regularly.
- (16) Superimpositions are used to create very emotional effects such as visually binding "youth and country" (children over landscape) or "sportspeople and heroes" (sportsparade over statue). Rather pathetic is the effect in No. 42 "Plan Wahlen" about efforts to keep an agricultural production where a skull is superimposed over various foodstuffs in order to indicate "hunger".
- (17) A list indicating the titles used to accompany issues No. 10 - 84 has been kept.
- (18) See No. 42 "Plan Wahlen": the first part could easily stem from Eisenstein's **General Line**, the second part from Riefenstahl's **Triumph of the Will**.

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