

**"To Rely on Verdi's Harmonies and not on Wagnerian Force."****The Reception of Italian Cinema in Switzerland, 1939–45**

Adopting an approach that appeals to the study of reception means emphasising an analysis of the discourses called forth by films rather than an analysis of the films themselves. To be analysed, these discourses must have left certain traces, although it is of course difficult to know what two spectators actually said to one another on leaving a cinema in 1939. The most obvious, visible, and regular source of information are film reviews in the daily press. Reception studies have, moreover, often privileged such sources, even if some scholars have drawn attention to the lack of compliance between the expression of a cultured minority – the critics – and the consumption of mass entertainment (see Daniel 1972, 19; Lindeperg 1997, 14). In my view, the press inevitably ranks among those discourses that have to be taken into consideration, but it is indispensable to confront it with others. Two of these discourses merit particular attention, namely that of the authorities, as communicated through the medium of censorship, and that of programming, which responds to rules that are chiefly commercial. To be sure, both are the mouthpieces of cultural, political, and economic elites. Accordingly, their discourses are governed by the ruling classes, especially with regard to the topic and period under investigation here: the reception of Italian cinema in Switzerland between 1939 and 1945. The possibilities of expressing opposition were practically ruled out, or at least muted and kept under control.

For want of a phantasmal spectator's voice, I therefore consider, as basic sources, discourses that claim to organise and determine reception, namely the "triad" consisting of the press, censorship, and programming. This approach has the considerable advantage that these three sources have left a relatively constant, regular, and coherent trace in Switzerland. It is nevertheless essential, in any historical approach, not to detach the analysis of reception from the complex context that conditions it. Thus, it is necessary to examine the structures on which these discourses rest, structures that in turn inevitably co-determine such discourses. Such structures

include cinema legislation, the organisation and characteristics of cinema networks, the professional organisation of the sector, the functioning of the boards of censors, the space reserved for cinema in the press as well as the autonomy of the latter, and the organisation of distribution companies.<sup>1</sup>

Studying these procedures of presentation, explanation, and authorisation, as well as analysing the discourses engendered by films, allows us to reveal the mechanisms underlying the logic of the legitimisation and hierarchisation of certain ideological positions. Such discursive work, moreover, enables us to illustrate different attitudes toward the Second World War and the countries that were waging it, most notably Italy in this particular case. Exploring the opinions expressed about what occurs on the screen permits us to go beyond the purely cinematic realm, for such views reveal a much wider world-view. This concerns feature films in particular, which the press, for example, comments on with less restraint than on a war report. The cinema justifies a displaced form of political discourse by shifting it onto the terrain of entertainment.

Taking programming into account partly explains the success of certain films. A title that remains on the bill for many weeks, and which has various reruns, is an indication of public interest. On the other hand, it tells us nothing about the reasons for such an interest – which may be linked to current events, to aesthetic and artistic enthusiasm, or simply to seeking amusement and distraction. With this method, it is difficult to measure failures with any precision: the programming of a film for a single week may conceal a bad business deal for the exhibitor or a respectable commercial operation. Likewise, it is conceivable that titles that have done well have, despite everything else, been taken off the bill due to other commitments entered into by the exhibitor and the distributor. Consequently, it is advisable to contrast the data produced by studying film programmes with those constructed on the basis of the two other sources considered.

Criticism and censorship have common characteristics and totally different objectives. Both involve viewing films and pronouncing a one-off judgement. Another similarity is that they involve artistic and qualitative judgments. This may seem astonishing on the part of censorship, unless we consider that censorship boards comprise journalists, artists and, more generally, film enthusiasts. Moreover, it is by no means rare to find in the records of such bodies aesthetic accounts rather than the reasons for authorising or banning the screening of a particular film. Criticism, as far as it goes, has certainly been subject to commercial constraints (cinemas provide an important part of the advertising revenue of many daily papers),

and indeed to editorial policy, even if it is difficult to gauge its importance today. Press comments form a discourse that is, by definition, destined to be made public, unlike the discourse of censorship, which is addressed to the authorities. In fact, only the final decision is made public, and not the records. The few lines that accompany the decision sometimes put forward arguments that are quite different from those that have actually led to it. The two modes of discourse (press and censorship) are thus at once comparable and complementary.

Finally, none of these three discourses in itself suffices for studying historical film reception – their interest for the researcher lies in their confrontation.

### **Italian cinema in Switzerland: from the silent period to the Second World War**

The history of the cinematic relations between Switzerland and Italy is a rich and complex area that I do not for a moment claim to exhaust here. What follows is an outline of the main points.<sup>2</sup> During the 1910s, Italy was one of the world's major film exporters. In Switzerland, as in a number of other countries, many a film show relied upon its output. Italian 'divas' like Lyda Borelli, Pina Menichelli, Francesca Bertini, and Soava Gallone proved to be tremendously successful on Swiss screens, just as the adventures of Maciste, the famous "strongman." The massive presence of Italian films in Switzerland did not last long, because transalpine cinema suffered a crisis toward the end of the First World War and began to disappear from Swiss cinemas at the beginning of the 1920s. Although this demise coincided with Benito Mussolini's ascent to power, it was not the outcome of some ideological opposition to Fascism on the part of the Swiss authorities, public, or cinema exhibitors, but rather the result of the economic collapse of Italian film production. The figures for 1922 (the year of the March on Rome) evidence this development: only 144 films were made that year, as opposed to 333 in 1921 (Bernardini 1991, 1112);<sup>3</sup> that is, there was a severe downturn, which continued in subsequent years.

Thus, Italian cinema disappeared from the commercial circuit, to the great regret of the large Italian community in Switzerland, or for all intents and purposes to the great regret of its representatives.<sup>4</sup> It did not, on the

2 For further detail, see my earlier studies: Haver/Kromer 1996; Haver/Kromer 1997; Haver 2000.

3 Only films longer than 3'000 feet are considered.

4 In the issue of *La Squilla Italica* that appeared on November 30, 1935, the editor noted

1 I have developed these aspects in detail in Haver 2003.

other hand, disappear everywhere, for a less apparent parallel distribution of sorts continued to exist. This was encouraged by Rome, and was mainly aimed at Italian citizens resident in Switzerland. Parallel distribution did not use the usual commercial cinema circuit, because screenings took place at the *Casa d'Italia*. Present in almost every important Swiss town, such venues were run by local sections of the Fascist Party, which did its utmost to provide a framework for the activities of Italians living abroad. Up until the beginning of the war, these screenings (which were extremely frequent and far cheaper than the conventional cinema circuit) were also attended by Swiss citizens. Their visibility was less important, however, since only the Italian community's press took regular notice; the critics of the Swiss daily papers limited themselves to reviewing the new releases on the regular circuit.

In other words, Italian cinema was all but absent during the 1930s. In 1940, however, the conditions that had led to this absence began to change. On the one hand, film production was relaunched in Italy due to a series of government measures and subsidies, which enabled it to become relatively important once again: 45 feature films emerged from Italian studios in 1938. Such progress was to continue until the beginning of the 1940s and was to turn the Italian peninsula into the foremost producer of feature films in 1941 and 1942. On the other hand, after summer 1940 and following the occupation of France, the regular ways of supplying the Swiss film market were thrown into confusion, since without any warning the importing of films from certain countries became difficult. French output suddenly ground to a halt in June 1940, with exports only being gradually resumed under German control.<sup>5</sup> The importing of Anglo-American films also met with some difficulties. Thus, the opportunity to reconquer the Swiss market arose for Italy, and the market share of Italian films experienced a certain increase, as shown by import figures, but also, more conspicuously, by actual cinema programming quotas.

Nevertheless, it has to be said straightaway that a relatively modest presence was involved, one that would never really call the supremacy of American, French, and German films into question: American films dominated the national market, whereas German films held second place in German-speaking Switzerland and French films held second place in the French-speaking part of the country.

with bitterness that "Italian films are rarely seen in Switzerland, and certainly much less than films from other countries." *La Squilla Italica* was the main newspaper of the Italian community. It was controlled by the Fascist Party and was very close to the Italian diplomatic authorities.

5 French production accounted for more than half of the French-speaking market in Switzerland.

## Italian films and the press

The arrival of the first films made at *Cinecittà*, an important group of studios that opened in the suburbs of Rome in April 1937, seems to have triggered the memories of critics who had known, and often appreciated, Italian silent cinema. This earlier, hallowed era was recalled so often that it became a sort of leitmotif. In early articles about *SCIPIONE L'AFRICANO* (Carmine Gallone, 1937), this evocation may seem quite logical, moreover. In fact, Italian silent cinema was well known for its peplums; as it was, this genre had fallen into disuse and Gallone's film appeared to be seeking to bring it back into fashion. Everything therein seems to be orchestrated so that the link with the hallowed period of the silents is made, from the choice of subject to that of the director, which did not escape Jeanne Clouzot, the critic of the *Journal de Genève*:

LES DERNIERS JOURS DE POMPEJ [GLI ULTIMI GIORNI DI POMPEI, Carmine Gallone, Amleto Palermi, 1926], grande production historique de Carmine Gallone, mise au jour en 1926 ou 1927, avait été comme le chant du cygne de la première période du cinéma italien. On sait que ce dernier, après des années de stérilité fait depuis peu un gros effort de relèvement, d'où sont déjà sortis de beaux films, en tête desquels L'ESCADRON BLANC [LO SQUADRONE BIANCO, Augusto Genina, 1936] et SCIPION L'AFRICAIN [SCIPIONE L'AFRICANO] que voici à l'Alhambra et que signe de nouveau Carmine Gallone.<sup>6</sup>

This nostalgic refrain lasted for several years, less so when a particular film was criticised and more so when Italian cinema was spoken of in more general terms. Thus, in an article aptly called "Renaissance du cinéma italien," Eva Elie reverts to the same terms as her colleague, this time using an almost sentimental tone:

Il y a pire que brûler ce qu'on avait adoré, c'est: l'oublier. Oublié, le vieux cinéma italien qui, voici près d'un quart de siècle, occupait la première place dans la production d'alors. [...] Mais sur la tombe où l'on jetait des fleurs, s'élève aujourd'hui une petite cité, Cinecittà, sorte d'usine où s'impriment... les rêves.<sup>7</sup>

6 Jeanne Clouzot, De film en film. In: *Journal de Genève*, December 12, 1938. ["GLI ULTIMI GIORNI DI POMPEI, a major historical production by Carmine Gallone, released in 1926 or 1927, was a sort of swansong of the first period of Italian cinema. One knows that, after years of sterility, the latter has recently made a big effort to get back on its feet, leading to the release of some fine films, foremost among which are LO SQUADRONE BIANCO and SCIPIONE L'AFRICANO, now on at the Alhambra and to which Carmine Gallone has once again put his name."]

7 Eva Elie, Renaissance du cinéma italien. In: *L'Illustré*, 35, August 29, 1940. ["There is something worse than burning what one has loved, and that's forgetting it. Forgotten,

Even in 1942, when the Italian film industry was making good headway (119 films were produced that year), the vision suggested by an article in the Bernese newspaper *Der Bund* is, like those above, oriented toward the past:

Seit der vor einigen Jahren erfolgten Verstaatlichung des Filmschaffens hat für den italienischen Film eine ganz neue Epoche begonnen. Auf grosszügiger Basis und mit modernsten Mitteln ausgerüstet, begann damals die Bearbeitung des in vielen Hinsichten brachliegenden Arbeitsfeldes. Der italienische Film hatte sich nie vom Sturz aus der glorreichen Höhe erholt, in die ihn das Schaffen der Jahre vor dem ersten Weltkrieg gebracht hatte, als Grossfilme wie JULIUS CAESAR [GIULIO CESARE, Enrico Guazzoni, 1914], QUO VADIS? [Enrico Guazzoni, 1912], und CABIRIA [Giovanni Pastrone, 1914] die Welt in Erstaunen setzten. Der amerikanische Film mit seinen grössern Mitteln und weitem Möglichkeiten setzte in den Nachkriegsjahren so intensiv ein, dass sich das italienische Filmschaffen nach einigem vergeblichen Widerstand im Sande einer trüben Mittelmässigkeit verlor.<sup>8</sup>

In order to really grasp the meaning of these quotations, it must be borne in mind that the opening of the Italian studios and the desire on the part of the Fascist regime to grant an important place to cinema were bits of information that were well-known to film journalists and their readers. Many declarations and press releases of this ilk had in fact preceded the films.<sup>9</sup> A well-orchestrated press campaign was used to announce the filming of *SCIPIONE L'AFRICANO*, and although the film only screened in the French-speaking cantons in December 1938, it had received much press coverage for two years prior to this. Press reports highlighted the costs of the imposing sets and the impressive number of extras, horses, and elephants.<sup>10</sup> In

the old Italian cinema that, almost a quarter of a century ago now, had pride of place in the production of the time. [...] But on the grave on which flowers were tossed there stands a small city, Cinecittà, a sort of factory where dreams are registered.”]

8 N. Maillart, Italienisches Filmschaffen. In: *Der Bund*, August 28, 1942. [“Some years ago, a new era commenced for Italian cinema, the nationalisation of film production being effectively set in place. Thus, provided with money as well as modern technology, work began on the in many respects uninvested sphere. Italian cinema had never quite recovered from the fall from its heyday before the First World War, when full-length feature films like *GIULIO CESARE*, *QUO VADIS?* and *CABIRIA* astonished the world. With its much higher budgets as well as other means, American cinema conquered international markets in the years after the war in such an effective manner that Italian film production – despite its vain resistance – was lost to cheerless mediocrity.”] Similar comments appeared in *Ciné Suisse*, 32, September 20, 1941, and in *Journal de Genève*, November 28, 1942.

9 The fact that Italian films were not current in Switzerland between the 1920s and the 1930s ought not to be taken to mean that they were totally absent. From time to time, a title made it across the border, such as *STADIO* (Carlo Campogalliani, 1934), which was shown in many towns in 1935.

10 See, in particular, Hannibal au cinéma. In: *Journal de Genève*, November 10, 1936.

other words, then-contemporary commentators knew that Italian cinema had been “great.” Writing in 1936, they could legitimately presume that the Fascist regime would employ every means to restore a sense of pride in Italian cinema. It was only logical, then, that they repeatedly recalled the respectable production of the silent era while adopting a wait-and-see attitude toward new films. Their underlying question was which hallmark, ideological and artistic, would the new regime confer upon this new generation of films?<sup>11</sup>

Contemporary critics were therefore steadfastly reticent and avoided overly engaging in a display of support for the first *Cinecittà* productions. *SCIPIONE L'AFRICANO* impressed them, it is true, due to the means used or to its technical mastery, but the film did not manage to arouse their enthusiasm. Instead, the first film to be greeted with enthusiasm was *L'ASSEDIO DELL'ALCAZAR* (1940), directed by Augusto Genina, another veteran of Italian cinema. The film deals with the occupation of the military academy of Toledo by the Republican troupes until the arrival of Franco's forces ended the siege. Italy's involvement in the conflict is absent. In Switzerland, the subject was very suggestive, because it was able to profit from the anti-Communist feelings of an ample fringe of intellectuals and almost all of the press. Arriving two years after *SCIPIONE*, the film was viewable in prints dubbed into French and German, in addition to Italian.<sup>12</sup> It was a huge critical and public success from the first. It ran for many weeks in numerous towns and was widely praised in the press: “An excellent film, one of the best of the year, not to say of these last few years.”<sup>13</sup> In *L'Illustré*, Eva Elie called it “grandiose” and saw it as a confirmation of the renaissance of Italian cinema.<sup>14</sup> If the critics are to be believed, the film was also a great success with the public, for when it premiered in November 1940 at the Scala cinema in Zurich, “an empty seat was not to be found [...]. The public, usually so undemonstrative in these towns of ours, brought the house down. The showing of *ALCAZAR* over, the programme carried on and the applause continued.”<sup>15</sup> While a number of voices expressed their reservations, these were not aimed at the film itself but rather at the opportunity to deal with such a delicate subject so soon after the Spanish Civil War.<sup>16</sup>

11 On the politics of propaganda in Italy, see Haver 2008.

12 *Schweizer Film Suisse*, 87, May 1940, p. 19.

13 In: *Feuille d'Avis de Lausanne*, May 19, 1941.

14 Eva Elie, *Le siège de l'Alcazar*. In: *L'Illustré*, 42, October 17, 1940.

15 E. W., *Pourquoi le film ALCAZAR nous intéresse-t-il?* In: *Almanach du cinéma*. Geneva: Film-Press Service 1941, n. p. This public success seems to be confirmed by its many weeks of programming and by its numerous reruns. See also *Journal de Genève*, May 13, 1941; *Der Bund*, February 24, 1942.

16 In: *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, November 22, 1940; *La Vie protestante*, May 16, 1941.



1 Advertisement for BENGASI (Augusto Genina, I 1942) in the Annual Book of the Swiss Film Industry, 1943.

L'ASSEDIO DELL'ALCAZAR opened the way to a particular type of Italian cinema, namely one depicting the realism of war, remote from the cardboard sets of SCIPIONE but just as ideologically loaded. The most widely circulated Italian films in Switzerland were UOMINI SUL FONDO (Francesco de Robertis, 1941), LA NAVE BIANCA (Roberto Rossellini, 1941), BENGASI (Augusto Genina, 1942) and ALFA TAU (Francesco de Robertis, 1942). All these productions were well-received by the critics, particularly ALFA TAU. They adopted an appreciative tone, pointing out the realism, restraint, objectivity, and even nobility in the handling of the conflict. Moreover, they often rated Italian output about the war as the best.<sup>17</sup>

### Distribution and programming

During the 1930s, the main supplier of Italian films for the Swiss commercial circuit was SEFI in Lugano, whose name clearly announced its aims: *Società Espansione Films Italiani*. Notwithstanding the company's efforts, Italian cinema did not achieve what might be called a solid presence in Switzerland, except in the Ticino, the Italian-speaking part of the country. With the outbreak of war, the situation became slightly more advantageous for SEFI. Alongside it, other distribution companies turned to Italian producers because of the above-mentioned supply problems. Nevertheless, while Italy began to be thought of as a country able to supply Swiss movie theatres, its cinema was barely known to a wide section of the public. As a result, many different attempts at promoting it were organised.

From 25th to 30th September 1941, SEFI, in collaboration with the distributor Columbus Film and with the support of *Pro Lugano*, an association responsible for promoting the city's touristic and cultural development, organised an Italian film festival, which was held at the *Kursaal* and the *Supercinema* in Lugano, and involved various personalities and stars connected with *Cinecittà*. The event went far beyond the cantonal framework: the national press was invited, and the event received a lot of press cover-

17 I have consulted the following articles in particular. On ALFA TAU: *La Revue*, March 22, 1943; *Gazette de Lausanne*, March 22, 1943; *Gazette de Lausanne*, May 10, 1943; *Journal de Genève*, March 1, 1943; *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, February 16, 1943; May 5, 1943; *Nouvelliste Valaisan*, September 25, 1943. On BENGASI: *Feuille d'Avis de Lausanne*, March 22, 1943; *La Revue*, May 10, 1943; *Feuille d'Avis de Lausanne*, May 10, 1943; *Journal de Genève*, May 31, 1943. On UOMINI SUL FONDO: *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, June 3, 1941; *Journal de Genève*, June 5, 1944; *Nouvelliste Valaisan*, August 5, 1944; *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, June 16, 1943; April 19, 1943. On LA NAVE BIANCA: *Feuille d'Avis de Vevey*, November 2, 1942; *Journal de Genève*, November 28, 1942.

age. The weekly *Ciné Suisse* even devoted a whole issue to Italian cinema.<sup>18</sup> Following this success, a new edition of the festival was organised for the following year. Due to the war, however, the second festival was also the last. In order to reap the fruits of this event, the SEFI catalogue for the 1942 festival featured fifty films in a German version and forty in a French version.

On account of these different factors and events, the importing of Italian films effectively increased between 1939 and 1943. Following the armistice of 8th September 1943, this tendency came to a halt in 1944, thereby paralysing the Italian film industry. On the other hand, the number of screenings seems to have been modest up until 1942.<sup>19</sup> *Cinecittà* productions only began to take hold in 1943, as if a period of assimilation had been necessary. Many Italian films were released in Switzerland with a time lag of one or two, or indeed sometimes even three years after being made.

A survey undertaken by Josef Fässler in twenty-eight cinemas in Greater Zurich between 1st November 1943 and 29th February 1944 provides a snapshot of the programming of feature-length fiction films in the most important city in German-speaking Switzerland. This survey was published in *Der Filmberater*, the Lucerne Catholic journal.<sup>20</sup> By way of comparison, I have examined the programmes of ten Lausanne cinemas over the same period.

The following table shows the distribution of the 622 films screened in Zurich and the 164 films shown in Lausanne according to the country of provenance (the number of first-run films appears in brackets):

Origin of the films	Zurich		Lausanne	
	absolute figures	%	absolute figures	%
USA	380 (48)	61.09	82 (41)	50.00
Germany	135 (16)	21.70	6 (3)	3.66
France	44 (2)	7.07	57 (5)	34.76
Italy	22 (5)	3.54	9 (7)	5.49
UK	15 (3)	2.41	2 (1)	1.22
Others	13 (5)	2.08	7 (3)	4.27
Switzerland	13 (4)	2.09	1 (1)	0.61
Total	622	100.00	164	100.00

18 *Ciné Suisse*, 32, September 20, 1941. See also Emile Grêt, *Rassegna del film italiano*. In: *Ciné Suisse*, 34, October 4, 1941.

19 My programming survey focuses on Lausanne, Geneva, and Zurich.

20 *Der Filmberater*, May 1944, p. 39. The figures are taken from a seminar project carried out by Fässler at Fribourg University.

More than 80 percent of the films screened in the two cities come from two countries, with the USA claiming the lion's share for itself in both instances. In order to establish how matters progressed during the war years, the table below shows the figures relative to the screening of Italian films in Lausanne. The weeks of programming rather than the films are counted; a film programmed for two weeks is thus accounted for twice.

Year	Total number of programmes in Lausanne	Programmes of Italian films in Lausanne	Importing of Italian films into Switzerland <sup>21</sup>	Production of feature-length fiction films in Italy <sup>22</sup>
1939	558	4 0.72 %	32	50
1940	546	3 0.55 %	43	83
1941	526	8 1.52 %	54	89
1942	524	4 0.76 %	50	119
1943	543	23 4.24 %	63	70
1944	562	25 4.45 %	20	20
1945 <sup>23</sup>	205	16 7.80 %	(14) <sup>24</sup>	-

The commercial takeoff of Italian cinema was marked by a comedy distributed by SEFI in 1942. This was *SCAMPOLO* (Nunzio Malasomma, 1941), whose heroine, Lilia Silvi, became instantly famous in Switzerland. The film ran for four months at the Bellevue in Zurich,<sup>25</sup> a 770-seater cinema, for nine weeks at the Rex in Lausanne in 1943, and for nine weeks at the Alhambra in Geneva in 1943 and 1944; all three cinemas had a capacity of 1'500 and 1'200 seats respectively, without counting numerous reruns. However, the film does not appear to have been distributed in a dubbed version, at least not in French-speaking Switzerland.<sup>26</sup> This success suddenly gave a commercial value to other films starring the same actress, such as *DOPO DIVORZIEREMO* (Nunzio Malasomma, 1940), *IL DIAVOLO VA IN COLLEGIO* (Jean Boyer, 1944), *LA BISBETICA DOMATA* (Ferdinando Maria Poggioli, 1942), and lastly *LA VISPA TERESA* (Mario Mattoli, 1943). Without achieving the success of *SCAMPOLO*, all these titles were good money-makers and had runs of two to three weeks in many towns.

21 Aeppli 1981, 155 and 201.

22 Gili 1985, 42.

23 For 1945, only screenings from January 1 to May 10, have been taken into consideration.

24 Figure for the whole of 1945.

25 See *Feuille d'Avis de Lausanne*, September 10, 1943.

26 See *Journal de Genève*, November 15, 1943.



## Institutions and censorship

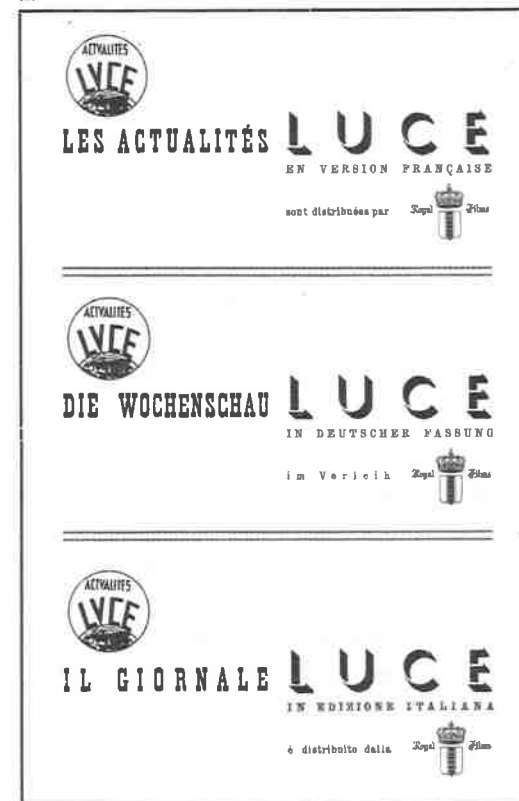
In Switzerland, censorship was traditionally a local-level institution. Initially, it was mainly exercised by the municipal authorities; subsequently, many cantonal committees were set up during the 1920s. Although these bodies did not involve the disappearance of local decision-making, their work involved regulating the cinema admission age, waiving regulations, and implementing other routine, less important measures. This, at all events, was the situation in French-speaking Switzerland, which I have studied in greater detail than the German-Swiss context. Systematic federal censorship only arrived with the mobilisation of the Swiss army in 1939. Logically, it was controlled by the military and was exercised in Berne by the Film Section of the Press and Radio Division of the Army General Staff. Since the municipal and cantonal boards of censors had remained in place, the goal of military censorship was not to deal with questions of morality or public order, but instead to look into matters concerning the new international situation. Its main concern was to safeguard army secrets and honour, and to guarantee Swiss neutrality by protecting the country from foreign films promoting too insidious propaganda.

Federal censors exercised only moderate censorship on Italian films. A few rare feature films were banned, like *DOCUMENTO Z3* (Alfredo Guarini, 1943),<sup>27</sup> which recounts the story of Italian secret agents active in Yugoslavia before the invasion of the country by the Axis troops; another case was *I PIRATI DELLA MALESIA* (Enrico Guazzoni, 1941), an adaptation of a late-nineteenth-century novel by Emilio Salgari that was critical of British colonialism. *ADDIO KIRA* and *NOI VIVI* (Goffredo Alessandrini, 1942), a two-part anti-Soviet film, was initially approved, but subsequently banned when the Swiss government attempted to establish diplomatic relations with the USSR. Other films suffered cuts, like *BENGASI* and *GIARABUB* (Goffredo Alessandrini, 1942). Overall, however, Italian films did not give cause for concern, including those whose ideological colours were not concealed. At times there was a sort of projection or co-opting of the subject matter of a film, such as when the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* explained the authorisation of an ideologically pointed film like *L'ASSEDIO DELL'ALCAZAR*:

Wenn die schweizerische Armeefilmzensur diesen realistischen Kriegsfilm zur Vorführung freigegeben hat, so geschah es in der Erwägung, dass hier ein würdiges Beispiel vorliegt, wie eine kleine Gruppe entschlossener Soldaten und Offiziere durch persönlichen Mut und Treue zur Fahne einem ungleich stärkeren Gegner heroischen Widerstand geleistet hat.<sup>28</sup>

27 Verbotene Filme. Swiss Federal Archives, E 4450, no. 5803.

28 *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, November 22, 1940. ["If the censorship agencies of the Swiss mili-



2 Advertisement for the Italian newsreel *LUCE* in the Annual Book of the Swiss Film Industry, 1942.

Yet the activity of the military censors was not restricted to authorising, cutting, or banning films. At the start of mobilisation, the commanding officer of the Film Section, Werner Sautter, held a series of interviews with De Mandato, press attaché of the Italian Legation, in order to draw up rules for the organisation of screenings for Italian nationals.<sup>29</sup> Their negotiations were also concerned with the possibility of a greater openness of the Swiss market toward films from the Italian peninsula. Following the occupation of France, the Swiss cinema network lacked new films and German cinema looked set to become dominant in the highly sensitive newsreel market. According to Sautter and his superiors, Italy was able to help avoid this

tary approved the release of this realistic war film, they did so considering it a dignified instance of heroic resistance toward a much stronger enemy, exemplified by a small group of soldiers and officers, their personal courage as well as their loyalty to the flag.”]

29 The contacts between Sautter and De Mandato are mentioned in a report presented by the former on August 5, 1940 to Colonel Victor Perrier, the acting head of the Press and Radio Division since April (Swiss Federal Archives, E 4450, no. 5798).

situation. Negotiations had rapid results: a special version of the newsreel *LUCE* was distributed in Switzerland in the three main national languages. The commercial importing of *LUCE* – which exhibitors, it must be added, did not hold in high regard – was thus strongly encouraged, even instigated, by the Press and Radio Division of the Army General Staff. Its commanding officer, Colonel Perrier, explained the reasons for this measure in a note written during summer 1940:

J'ai pensé qu'il est urgent de rétablir l'équilibre et d'opposer aux puissances wagnériennes les harmonies de Verdi. C'est pourquoi, j'ai chargé un de mes collaborateurs de prendre officieusement contact avec un représentant de la Légation d'Italie, pour voir s'il était possible d'introduire en Suisse l'actualité italienne.<sup>30</sup>

The “collaborator” in question was undoubtedly Lieutenant Werner Sautter, who, according to the same report, had also acted (always *officieusement*, that is, unofficially) as a mediator with many exhibitors so that they would start booking *LUCE*. It is noteworthy that when not donning his grey-green army uniform, Sautter was director of Columbus Film in Zurich. Hitherto specialising in Swiss, French, and American films, this distribution company suddenly became one of the three main importers of Italian films.<sup>31</sup> Toward the end of 1940, a full-page announcement appeared in the trade journal *Schweizer Film Suisse*:

Der italienische Film ist im Aufstieg!  
Angeichts der jüngsten Erfolge und der zunehmenden Beliebtheit italienischer Grossfilme beim schweizerischen Publikum, freuen wir uns, mitteilen zu können, dass wir die Alleinvertretung der bedeutendsten italienischen Produktionsgesellschaft, der ENIC, übernommen haben.

Wir werden eine sorgfältige Auswahl aus der umfangreichen Produktion vornehmen und sie teils in deutscher Sprache, teils in Originalfassung mit deutschen Untertiteln, herausbringen. Eine besondere ausführliche Ankündigung wird demnächst näheren Aufschluss über die ersten ausgewählten Filme geben.

Columbus Film A.G.<sup>32</sup>

30 Note by Colonel Perrier, August 8, 1940, Swiss Federal Archives, E 4450, no. 5887. [“I think that it is urgent to restore the balance and to rely on Verdi’s harmonies and not on Wagnerian force. This is why I have instructed one of my collaborators to make contact, unofficially, with a representative of the Italian Legation to see if it is possible to introduce the Italian newsreel into Switzerland.”]

31 Apart from the SEFI in Lugano, the third company is Geneva-based Royal-Film; a few other Italian films were imported by Monopol-Films in Zurich. See the catalogues published in the different issues of the *Annuaire de la cinématographie suisse*.

32 *Schweizer Film Suisse*, 93, December 1940. [“Italian film is on the rise! Taking into ac-

Sautter’s meeting with De Mandato seems to have had interesting repercussions for Columbus.

Colonel Perrier’s canvassing went further: it was not just limited to furthering the entry into Switzerland of the *LUCE* newsreel, but it also organised a market for it by intervening directly with exhibitors. Moreover, its underlying rationale is extremely surprising, as it led the Swiss authorities to compensate for the predominance of German newsreels with Italian ones, that is, produced in a country that, from the beginning of the previous month, was now fighting alongside Nazi Germany. Perrier’s note provides an immediate explanation for this rationale: in this particular instance, he is less concerned with military propaganda than with the ‘Germanisation’ of filmed information in Switzerland. The few Italian claims, kept to a minimum, and the irredentism of the Canton of Ticino, liable to be encouraged by the presence of a Fascist discourse on Swiss screens, were considered, on the one hand, to be a lesser evil with regard to the German threat, and, on the other, to be reduced by the fact that the *Istituto LUCE* was to create ad hoc edited versions for Switzerland. Nevertheless, Perrier’s position confirms that a watered-down Fascist discourse was considered to be perfectly suitable to Switzerland by the authorities responsible for censorship. As the attitude of various French-speaking daily papers suggests, Fascism enjoyed a better reputation than National Socialism, at least among the bourgeoisie in the French-speaking part of Switzerland, and even managed to attract a certain amount of sympathy.

## Conclusion

The Swiss example reveals one of the aspects of the massive investment that Fascist Italy effected in the cinema sector. The two main axes of this effort are well represented: firstly, the rallying of support for the regime’s ideological discourse; and secondly, the attempt to commercially promote an industry largely subsidised by the State. The penetration of Italian cinema into Switzerland was certainly made easier by the Italian associative network, but it also tended to gain an increasingly important place for itself on the regular Swiss movie theatre market. During the Second World

count the recent successes and the increasing popularity of Italian feature films among the Swiss public, we are delighted to announce that we have acquired the exclusive rights of the most important Italian production company, ENIC. We shall be making a careful selection of this vast output and be distributing it partly in the German language, partly in the original version with German subtitles. Soon, a special detailed announcement will provide more information about the first films chosen. Columbus Film Ltd.”]



War, a series of favourable conditions made this breakthrough possible: the flourishing of Italian cinema coincided with a discontinuity in the supply of films from the USA and France – the former dominant suppliers of the Swiss market –, giving way to a growing presence of German productions. The big commercial successes were lightweight productions like SCAMPOLO. Although the critics paid little attention to such comedies, they nevertheless enabled Italian cinema to consolidate its presence. As shown, another great Italian success was the much more committed L'ASSEDIO DELL'ALCAZAR. These two films, which intervened at two very different levels – pure entertainment, on the one hand, and the ideological promotion of government policy, on the other – were the spearheads of Italian production in Switzerland during the war. Both enjoyed box-office and critical success that by far exceeded SCIPIONE L'AFRICANO, despite the enormous resources provided by the Fascist government. Instead, the production of war films followed the example of L'ASSEDIO DELL'ALCAZAR with a number of so-called sober works that, as we have seen, were much appreciated in Switzerland, often appearing as extremely “neutral” in the critics’ eyes. Censorship probably did not interfere with their distribution for the same reason. Contrary to what occurred with a certain number of the German ally’s productions, Italian feature films depicting the war were not banned from Swiss screens. This genre was even over-represented in Switzerland in relation to its numerical importance within Italian production. As for newsreels, censorship turned into an active ally of the Italian film industry by seeking productions in Rome for distribution in Switzerland. The southern neighbour seemed less threatening than the one to the north, and the ideological dimension of numerous films seemed to trouble neither the censors nor the professionals, nor the critics.

*English Translation by Paul Hammons*

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