Training and entertaining consumers: travelling corporate film shows in Switzerland

Zimmermann, Y
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Outside commercial cinemas, travelling film shows organised by corporations for advertising purposes were a major factor in film culture in Switzerland from the early 1920s to the late 1950s. Corporate marketing through itinerant film shows was mainly a domain of the food and consumer goods industry. This industry produced – and still does – everyday commodities that were advertised as brands, called Markenartikel in German, for reasons of product differentiation. Whereas the iron, steel and machine industry mainly maintained business to business promotion, the food and consumer goods industry addressed consumers – that is a large, rather unspecialised audience as it was to be found in cinemas.

The food industry was among the first in Switzerland to commission films on manufacturing such as Milcherzeugung in der Schweiz (Préparation et exportation du lait par la Ste laitière des Alpes bernois, Milk Production in Switzerland, Berner Alpenmilch-Gesellschaft, Pathé, FR 1909), Eine riesenartige Industrie (A Gigantic Industry, Nestlé, 1913) and Die Fabrikation der Schweizerkäse (Production of Swiss Cheese, Weltkinematograph, DE 1913) that, from 1909 onwards, were run internationally in the short film programmes of commercial cinemas. Yet the largest part of corporate films circulated outside fixed-site cinemas in non-commercial venues such as trade fairs, exhibitions and classrooms. In the early 1930s, the food and consumer goods industry turned to a new strategy to distribute industrial films, which was, of course, an old exhibition practice: travelling cinema. In the following, the characteristics of travelling corporate film shows in Switzerland will be outlined with the focus on the travelling film shows of the Maggi Food Corporation. Although still little is known about the itinerate exhibition of corporate films in detail, it is evident that this screen practice was an important factor in the area of non-commercial film until the early 1960s. It played a crucial role in socialising children by means of film media and in introducing them to the world of consumerism, as a sketch of the impact of travelling corporate film shows on popular film culture outside commercial cinemas in Switzerland will demonstrate.
Consumer Education: the Example of Maggi

The Maggi Food Corporation, founded in Kempttal near Zurich in 1886 by Julius Maggi, was probably the first food corporation in Switzerland to tour the country with corporate films. Maggi, still well known for its soup and seasonings, started travelling corporate film shows in 1921, that is, almost a decade earlier than most other corporations of the food industry in Switzerland. Such early use is explained by Maggi's long tradition of slide-illustrated travelling lectures. Maggi introduced travelling lecture tours together with factory visits at the turn of the 20th century. The aim was to bridge the gap between producer and consumer that resulted from the industrialisation and urbanisation in the second half of the 19th century. The industrial revolution not only changed food production and market structures, but also altered traditional food patterns of the consumers. Malnutrition, especially among factory workers, became a major economic and social problem propelling the development of a medically based nutrition science and, in Switzerland, a public food education programme called rationelle Volksernährung (sensible nutrition for everyone). On the other hand, food scandals constantly threatened the consumers' trust in the quality of industrially produced food. Accordingly, Maggi's travelling lectures, as the later film shows, did not just serve advertising aims, but were also a means of educating consumers in the spirit of the rationelle Volksernährung. The lectures familiarised both children and adults with new and healthy nourishment methods that should guarantee the economic, political and social stability of a country that underwent fundamental changes by industrialisation.¹

Maggi's lectures took place during the winter season. From November to March, representatives of the corporation toured the French- and German-speaking parts of Switzerland and organised shows in classrooms and municipal localities. There were two shows a day: one in the afternoon for children who attended the presentation under the supervision of their teachers and one in the evening for adults. Announced in the local press and in grocery stores, the shows were free and offered an additional attraction which was most popular: a soup tasting.

The first part of the slide-illustrated lectures focused on the industrial production of Maggi products, whereas the second part concentrated on the farming estates Maggi maintained for marketing reasons even when they were not profitable anymore. Maggi was very keen on displaying its rootedness in agriculture as a proof of the natural qualities of industrially produced food. The afternoon show for pupils consisted of an additional patriotic lecture on national geography and history. Such lessons in civic education were the prerequisite for private industry to get access to classrooms and children, the most woody target audience as tomorrow's customers and the best lure to attract the (mainly female) audience to the evening shows.⁴

In 1920, Maggi commissioned a corporate film that would replace, from 1921 on, the coloured slides on the lecture tours.¹ The film was produced by Eos Film Basel and had two parts: Part one was called Die industriellen Betriebe der Firma Maggi in Kemptthal (Die Herstellung der bekannten Maggi-Produkte) (The industrial works of the Maggi Food Corporation in Kempttal: The Production of Maggi's famous products; part two Die landwirtschaftlichen Betriebe der Firma Maggi in Kempthal (Viehzucht, Futtermittel) (The farming estates of the Maggi Food Corporation in Kempttal: Stock breeding, cultivation of grain and vegetables). Unfortunately, the film is lost. But the detailed titles of both parts hold enough information to conclude that the film's content and message, along with its corporate function, distribution and exhibition, were suggested by the lantern slides.² It seems that the only novelty introduced by the »new« film medium was movement: Still images became »living« pictures. The introduction of film did not lead to a media turn in Maggi's marketing activities – slides were still widely in use after 1920 – but to an extension of the Medienverbund (media mix) used for educational and advertising purposes. The »new« film medium was integrated into established corporate media structures – in this case: into travelling lectures.

Portraying the Homeland

In 1929, Maggi revised and extended its itinerant show programme. In addition to the »classical« corporate film on industrial food production and the farming estates, the corporation launched in-house production of films about the homeland, so-called Heimatfilme, to conclude and lighten up the shows.³ These short non-fiction films had an average running time of fifteen minutes, were mostly in colour⁴ and portrayed the most attractive Swiss (mountain) regions, such as Central Switzerland, Bernese Oberland, Valais, Ticino, Graubünden, and the St. Gotthard Mountains. The Heimatfilme were directed by Paul Boesch, head of the public relations, film and photography department, who worked with Maggi from 1928 to his retirement in 1963. Boesch's films are best described as Kulturfilme (films on the Swiss way of life) in which the corporation represented only a discreet, but distinct presence through product placements.

BERGHEIMAT (Mountain Homeland, CH 1934) is a good example to outline the character of Maggi's homeland portraits. Explicitly credited as a »Heimat-Film der Fabrik von Maggis Nahrungsmitteln in Kempttal«, BERGHEIMAT is devoted to the alpine landscape and inhabitants of the Upper Valais.⁶ After a poetic description of the remote Rhone valley in the first title, the film displays the natural beauties of the region such as the famous Matterhorn, captured in the best light with passing clouds and a picturesque chapel in the foreground,
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throughout the whole film, we never get a glimpse of industrial food production. Instead, Maggi is present with two product placements: with the herds boy having a Maggi soup for lunch and with the arrival of the federal post in the mountain village by means of mules that carry boxes of Maggi products on their backs.

Maggi used these Heimatfilme in the shows to bestow a national image on the corporation. This was achieved by linking stereotyped national iconography — such as the Matterhorn, symbol of Switzerland, also the closing scene of the film — to the name of Maggi and by associating typically national characteristics like rural traditions and modern achievements such as the federal post and the railway network with the corporation, thus branding Maggi as Swiss. The second aim was, of course, to address the audience emotionally by provoking patriotic feelings. The iconography of alpine rural traditions perfectly fitted into the spirit of the Geistige Landesverteidigung (spiritual defence of the country) that was propelled in the 1930s by the threatening rise of fascism in the neighbouring countries. To set the country apart, the Geistige Landesverteidigung promoted the cultivation of cultural, social and political values that were claimed to be typical national features, properties and qualities — among them the agricultural traditions and mountains. Whereas the classical corporate film spoke to the mind of the audience, the Heimatfilme spoke to its heart. Maggi attracted audiences with a carefully chosen programme, a well-balanced mixture of information and entertainment with a special focus on national and regional interests that could be read by contemporary audiences as a corporate commitment to the country, thus further reinforcing the emotional bond of the consumers to the corporation. In detail, Maggi's travelling shows consisted of the following order: The programme started with a short lecture on healthy diet and Maggi products and the screening of the first part of the corporate film on the industrial production at Maggi. In the break, the popular soup tasting took place. Then the second part of the corporate film on Maggi's farming estates was screened, followed by the highlight of the film programme: the latest Heimatfilm.

This programme formula remained generally unvaried and in use until Maggi abandoned travelling film shows in the early 1960s. It is remarkable that during the whole period up to the 1960s, Maggi's travelling shows contained only silent films. They were narrated live, usually by cameraman Paul Boesch himself, and accompanied by recorded music. So within Maggi's travelling film shows, early cinema's exhibition mode of live commented short film programmes continued to exist until the early 1960s. With its event-formula combining live performance, media entertainment and audience participation, Maggi attracted up to 1,200 people to evening shows in the late 1920s. Afternoon shows were attended by an average of 400 pupils in 1929. In 1932, the corporation reached 300,000 children and adults with travelling film shows and soup tasting in grocery stores. The popularity of the shows outlasted the Second World War: Up to 900 bowls and spoons had to be cleaned after a screening in 1953.

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Suchard exhibition van in 1937
(Musée d'art et d'histoire, Neuchâtel, Fonds Suchard, ST 425)

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Popular Film Culture outside Fixed-Site Cinemas

Maggi was by far not the only corporation to advertise brands through travelling film shows. As a reaction to the Great Depression, numerous consumer goods corporations such as Suchard, Wander, Steinfels and Henkel resorted to this marketing strategy in the early 1930s.

To absorb serious losses in the international chocolate business through a sales increase at home, Suchard launched a nationwide film campaign in rented cinemas in 1932 to promote its milk chocolate brand Milka. Wo Berge sich erheben (Where Mountains Rise, German distribution title: AUF GROSSE
FAHRT, On a Great Trip, Schonger, DE 1932, an adventurous trip by three German Boy Scouts across Switzerland (including a factory visit at Suchard in Serrières near Neuchâtel), topped the expectations of the general management in both audience response (over 170,000 viewers for the sound version alone) and sales. The film medium having thus proved its popularity with customers and profitability for corporate advertising, Suchard equipped the new exhibition van with a mobile film projector and started screening corporate films outdoors in public places at night among them a shortened version of Wo BERGE SICH ERHEBEN and, in the late 1940s, JU SCHOGGI-DORF (In the Chocolate Village, Valérien Schmidely, CH 1948), a semi-fictional factory visit.

Apparently the same practice was also in use in Germany. According to Hans-Gerd Conrad, the Dr. Oetker Food Corporation hit the road with vans from 1926 onwards. In 1930, the vans were equipped for sound film projection. But, whereas the Second World War set an end to this advertising practice in Germany, it continued in Switzerland up to the early 1960s.

The 1950s can even be said to mark the peak of the corporate travelling film exhibitions. With Geigy, even a chemical corporation joined the food and consumer goods industry in going on the road with corporate films. Geigy started touring the north-western and north-eastern parts of Switzerland in 1953 to promote its pest control products with two especially redesigned and equipped vans: one to be used as exhibition hall, the other as projection hall. Geigy’s cinema on wheels offered seats for thirty people. The sound film projector was installed in the cab over the driver’s seat, projecting so-called Demonstrationsfilme (demonstration films) about pest control in the house, garden and field at the back board of the van. Among them were two films directed by Otto Ritter: NEUZEITLICHE MAIkAFERBERKAMPFUNG (Combating May Bugs the Modern Way, CH 1950), an aesthetic report on the extensive and controversial pest control operation with Gesarol (a DDT-derivate) in the Valais in 1950, and DAS LOCH IM SPARSTRUMPF (Le Trou dans Le Bas de Laine, The Skeleton in the Cupboard, CH 1953), a semi-fiction with a humorous story line (interpreted by cabaret artists Voli Geiler and Walter Morath) about the blessings of modern chemistry in the combat against wool-eating insects.

The target audiences were housewives, farmers, local retailers and – again – children who were guided through the vans in the afternoon (often in school classes). Geigy would stop for one single day in each town or village, the corporation’s arrival having been announced the day before on handbills. In Amriswil (Thurgau), the film screenings were attended by 441 adults and 318 children in 1953, whereas the exhibition counted 337 adult visitors and on June 6, 1953, the corporation recorded a total of 723 viewers (185 children, 538 adults); on June 17, one in ten inhabitants of Lenzburg attended the screenings; and in Freiburg on June 23, Geigy’s cinema on wheels attracted an audience of 836 people (112 children and 724 adults).

There are other instances of travelling corporate film shows reaching extremely large audiences: In 1950, for example, over half a million housewives in the German-speaking part of Switzerland attended the forenoon screenings of DER GEIST VON ALLENWIL (The GHOST OF ALLENWIL, Max Haufler, CH 1950), a charming short crime story in Swiss-German dialect about three stolen pieces of bed linen, a story with which Sunlight promoted the washing powder Radion. The GHOST OF ALLENWIL was the first screen adaptation of the extremely popular radio play series Polizist Wäckerli (Policeman Wäckerli) with the leading radio speakers, among them Schaggi Streuli and Walburga Gmür, performing as leading actors in the film. It was five years later that director Kurt Früh adapted POLIZIST WÄCKERLI (CH 1955) as feature film for the “big screen”, again with Schaggi Streuli as the leading man.
The cultural and social impact of travelling corporate film shows can hardly be underestimated. The shows animated and, in the 1950s, even dominated popular film culture outside commercial cinemas. Furthermore, they played an important role regarding the socialisation of both children and adults by means of the film medium. In the 1920s and 1930s, corporate road shows often provided children and the rural populace with their first contact with film. The recollections of a Maggi representative on a film screening in a remote mountain village in 1934 are telling:

My arrival in Tarasp was a village event. I was received by the mayor, who offered me his support. The school screening was attended by the parson, the teacher and some of the village elders, who carefully followed the show and enjoyed their bowl of soup.

In Manas (a tiny village in the Lower Engadin), I was eagerly anticipated. To my astonishment, the church bells rang at the beginning of the show! Everybody came. Few of the participants had ever seen a film before.

The only way people in remote rural areas experienced cinema was as travelling film shows. And such experience was not shaped by international fiction feature films, but by short corporate non- or semi-fictions with national, regional or even local appeal. When private industry introduced an audience to film media, it introduced the viewers to the world of consumerism. With corporations bringing popular film culture to the people, the media presence of goods and brands spread into the remotest alpine regions, traditionally agricultural and self-supporting. In the expansion of popular film culture by corporations, media entertainment and consumer education went hand in hand, thus preparing the ground for a media-driven consumer culture.

**Economic Dominance in the non-commercial Field**

Due to scattered sources that require extensive and painstaking research in often badly kept private archives, a comprehensive history of travelling corporate film shows has not yet been written. The difficulty of collecting historical data is one of the reasons why this exhibition practice is still thought to be a short-lived one. Such underestimation is also due to the traditional focus of film studies on either commercial cinema or film as art (and the respective neglect of utility and non-commercial films).

Striking evidence of the dimension of travelling corporate film shows and their economic impact in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s can be gathered by correlating corporate activities with the Schweizer Schul- und Volkskino (Swiss School and People's Cinema). This non-profit organisation founded in 1921 maintained a travelling film service that also provided remote villages without fixed-site cinemas with so-called ‘good-films’ in the sense of the Kinoreformbewegung (cinema reform movement). After a decade of being the unchallenged leader in non-theatrical film distribution and exhibition, the Schul- und Volkskino began to suffer from the simultaneous rise of the food and consumer goods industry in the 1930s. The Schul- und Volkskino could not compete with private industry that brought regional films to people for free and attracted audiences with popular give-aways such as a bowl of soup, a bar of chocolate or a bar of soap. The rural populace, as the Schul- und Volkskino complained, was fully supplied with Landschaftsfilme (films on national landscapes) and not willing to pay for similar presentations. In 1941, the Schul- und Volkskino resorted to political measures and called for governmental restriction of the travelling corporate film shows – although without result. As a consequence, the travelling cinema service of the Schweizer Schul- und Volkskino had to be fundamentally reorganised. Under the name of Schweizer Filminformation Suisse, it was re-launched in 1949 as a travelling corporate film service. The adaptation of the originally reformist Schul- und Volkskino to private industry demonstrates the economic pressure exerted by the travelling corporate film shows in the field of non-commercial exhibition.

**The Decline of Travelling Corporate Film Shows**

In the early 1960s, corporations abandoned travelling film shows for various reasons. Marketing underwent fundamental changes at that time: Maggi, as many other corporations, outsourced advertising to external PR agencies.
1965, the introduction of TV commercials on Swiss television opened up a new advertising channel. In regard to the audience, television and mass motorisation brought about major changes in leisure activities. Television adapted two of the characteristics that had made travelling corporate film shows a success: It brought popular media culture to people's homes and sweetened information and consumer education with entertainment.

With the travelling corporate film shows being abandoned in the 1960s and the side shows of commercial cinemas being forsaken in the 1970s, corporate films lost their broad impact in the public sphere. As a kind of public display window, they have become a historical phenomenon—a phenomenon that today is still to be rediscovered, especially in the area of non-commercial distribution and exhibition, itself a rather neglected field in film studies. From a historiographical point of view, travelling corporate film shows teach us not to reduce film history to the history of commercial cinema.

Notes


3 Hattener, Sr., H. »Propaganda von Maggis Nahrungsmitteln spektiven und Zweck des Lichtbildes und Filmes in der Schweiz«. Schwei.

4 Zimmermann, Yvonne. »Maggi's first corporate Heimatkino Film Firnflanze unseres Hochgebirges« (1929) is also a colour film (Müller, 143). The film is preserved in a 16 mm print transferred from 35 mm, and nothing is known about the colouring process used.

5 With a running time of more than 30 minutes (530 m, 33 mm), Bergheimat is by far Boesch's longest homeland portrait.


