

Kornelia Imesch, Sigrid Schade, Samuel Sieber (eds.)

# Constructions of Cultural Identities in Newsreel Cinema and Television after 1945



**From:**

*Kornelia Imesch, Sigrid Schade, Samuel Sieber (eds.)*

**Constructions of Cultural Identities  
in Newsreel Cinema and Television after 1945**

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Newsreel cinema and television not only served as an important tool in the shaping of political spheres and the construction of national and cultural identities up to the 1960s. Today's potent televisual forms were furthermore developed in and strongly influenced by newsreels, and much of the archived newsreel footage is repeatedly used to both illustrate and re-stage past events and their significance.

This book addresses newsreel cinema and television as a medium serving the formation of cultural identities in a variety of national contexts after 1945, its role in forming audiovisual narratives of a »biopic of the nation«, and the technical, aesthetical, and political challenges of archiving and restaging cinematic and televisual newsreel.

Contributions by Nadja Elia-Borer, Knut Hickethier, Kornelia Imesch, Sigrid Schade, Uta Schwarz, Samuel Sieber and others.

**Kornelia Imesch** (Prof. Dr.) is professor for modern and contemporary art and architecture at the Section d'histoire de l'art, University of Lausanne, Switzerland.

**Sigrid Schade** (Prof. Dr.) is head of the Institute for Cultural Studies in the Arts at Zurich University of the Arts, Switzerland.

**Samuel Sieber** (PhD) is a researcher in Basel and Zurich, Switzerland.

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# **Constructions of Cultural Identities in Newsreel Cinema and Television after 1945**

## **Introduction**

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KORNELIA IMESCH, SIGRID SCHADE, SAMUEL SIEBER

### **NEWSREEL AND CULTURAL IDENTITY IN A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE**

This book addresses questions and issues concerning the construction of cultural identities in newsreel, (documentary) cinema and television as part of national discourses, political processes, and economic strategies in European countries after 1945. It thus extends the analysis beyond the frame of the preceding research project on art and culture reportages in the Swiss Newsreel between 1940 and 1975, initiated by Kornelia Imesch and co-directed by Sigrid Schade, both with a background in transdisciplinary research in art history and visual culture. The project was funded by the Swiss National Foundation. Samuel Sieber, as editor, reinforced the team with an extensive background in media studies.

The original project, titled “Art, cultural activities and the society of knowledge. Constructions of cultural identity in the Swiss Newsreel 1940-1975”<sup>1</sup> focused on the post-World War II Swiss Newsreel. The project re-

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1 “Kunst, Kunstbetrieb und Wissensgesellschaft Schweiz. Konstruktionen kultureller Identität in der Schweizer Filmwochenschau 1940-1975”, a collaboration between the Art History Department at the University of Lausanne (Kornelia Imesch) and the Institute for Cultural Studies in the Arts, Zurich University of

flected on the cultural and political function of the state-controlled mass medium with its very high attendance until the 1960s<sup>2</sup> as a precursor of commercial film cinema, and analyzed the particular discursive strategies of the Swiss Newsreel in constructing images, concepts, and meaning within a framework of a culturally-anchored ‘Swiss identity’. Here the term is not being considered as a fixed concept or reality, but as a construct in perpetual progress through historical, medial, imaginative and imaginary practices of identification, intertwining collectives and individuals, and thereby producing reality (cf. Hall 1992). Cultural identity concepts are usually implicitly and explicitly embedded within political discourses and politics, implying concepts of national identity within imagined communities (cf. Sieber 2014); as such, the project’s approach was to analyze the interrelations between the two concepts. The conditions of producing newsreels in three national languages, their distribution in the Swiss cinemas, and the specific Swiss institutions of the period had to be taken into account.

One of the main aims of the research project was to show that newsreel reports on making art and culture-related events played a politically motivated role within these processes and strategies,<sup>3</sup> and in fact, cultural production and the arts have played that role in a multiethnic Switzerland since the state’s formation in 1848 (cf. *Der Bund fördert* 1988; Imesch 2010). The project also traced and retraced strategies of the Swiss Newsreel in constructing national identity in the particular context of “Spiritual defense” [Geistige Landesverteidigung], an anti-fascist concept developed by Philipp Etter in the 1930s dominant in the pre- and postwar era until the 1970s (cf. Etter 1937; Amrein 2007).

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the Arts (Sigrid Schade), between 2009-2012. We thank Nadja Lutz who contributed to the project in its first phase and Mario Lüscher who was part of the project including the organization of a symposium in Lausanne 2012.

- 2 Until the 1960s the yearly attendance in Swiss cinemas was more than 30 million people (Tedeschi/Fragnière 2004: 12).
- 3 Reportages on art within newsreel had not been subject to analysis before in studies on the audiovisual medium. One of the rare analyses of art related reportages in international newsreel production can be found in the study of the representation of modern art in this medium in Germany after 1945 by Stamm (1983). For German newsreels see especially the doctoral theses of Schwarz (2002), and Bartels (2004).

As in other media too, the construction of an identity—be it cultural, national, ethnical, or religious—in newsreels was generated by the attribution of repeated, memorized, presumed or invented qualities of a ‘self’ and of ‘others’ (i.e. foreigners). Borders of inclusion and exclusion were thus directly and indirectly drawn and negotiated by using or producing ‘documents’ of cultural traditions and representations; by anticipation, adoption and adaptation of ‘foreign’ cultural influences (for example US-Americans) as ‘own ones’; and by distancing oneself by clichéd reportages from events abroad. The ‘own’ and the ‘foreign’ don’t necessarily have to be addressed within the same report, as the definition of a ‘self’ always includes definitions of the ‘other’ as the differing position (cf. Lutter/Reisenleitner 2002: 93-102).

Within its focus on art making in Switzerland, the project allowed to re-trace what the Swiss Newsreel stated as major events and artists of the Helvetic art world. It highlighted the dominant art terms and cultural assumptions of the period, and what in contrast was excluded as blind spots, segregated from the particularly Swiss “grand narrative” to which this modern filmic medium decidedly contributed (cf. Imesch 2010).

Newsreel has to be described as a specific historical audiovisual medium with specific combinatorics of reports in their rhetoric mix of sound—a usually male voiceover, spoken comments, music, noise—and moving images. The analysis of the rhetoric in the newsreels’ choices and combinations of reports running usually one to two minutes long shows a wide range of possibilities of connotation and denotation procedures within very short periods (cf. Barthes 1972a, 1972b, 1994). From this perspective, newsreel is an interwoven net of spoken word, music, written text, of moving and still images commenting on each other. The art of newsreel is the way in which it constructs and provides subjective and collective identification with usually mythical subjects (for example a ‘nation’) while at the same time naturalizing its contents.<sup>4</sup>

During and after World War II, the Swiss newsreel showed aspects astonishingly resembling styles of talking in the voice-over, the choice of patriotic motives and the combinatorial strategies of reportages, for exam-

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4 Cf. Barthes 1972a; 1972b. According to Barthes, a myth is an ideology pretending to be nature. For more on how naturalization processes function in visual culture see also Schade/Wenk 2011.

ple of the Nazi German newsreels. Consequently, Swiss newsreel must be addressed as part of a broader history of visual culture and media, as being related to and sometimes in economic exchange with other countries' newsreels and formats at a given period, and as a specific sort of archive.<sup>5</sup>

Newsreels' international success started running its course from the 1910s, at the same time as printed photojournalism (cf. Baechlin/Muller-Strauss 1952:10), and preceded by the "Actuality film", a genre and term coined by the Lumière Brothers in France in 1895, at the birth of the seventh art (cf. Huret 1984). A historical survey of the newsreel cinema and its functions reveals the medium's capacity as a tool of political, ideological and economical propaganda<sup>6</sup> and its commercial relevance in early Western consumer societies as decisive success factors. Since World War I and the introduction of sound film in the 1920s, newsreel became an attractive mass medium within and for nationalist discourses and politics, a means of indoctrination particularly in wartime, and even as a tool of war itself.

When in 1945 and 1946—after World War II—a comprehensive ideological re-orientation of former fascist countries through the allied forces took place the newsreel again played an integral role in the process of ideological and political "re-education" (Hahn 1997) as part of a larger "Marshall Plan".<sup>7</sup> The United States of America and the other countries of the victorious powers were definitely aware of the powerful effects of the audiovisual medium. The production of newsreels after 1945 commanded a large arsenal of stylistic and technological resources, as well as skilled people. Although the period immediately after World War II proved to be the last phase during which the newsreel was produced, the genre kept its importance as a decisive audiovisual mass medium by being an important tool in the development and shaping of politico-cultural public spheres well into the 1960s.<sup>8</sup> Its reportages, produced in the typical documentary style of black and white, generally covered a spectrum of topics ranging from politics, scientific and technical innovations, cultural and art related events,

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5 For newsreel in general, see Baechlin/Muller-Strauss 1951.

6 Criticized by Enzensberger as early as 1962: 88. On Enzensberger, see also King 2007.

7 On the context of Germany's newsreels see Reimers et al. 1983; Hohenberger/Keilbach 2003.

8 On French newsreels in the context of the liberation see Lindeperg 2008.



sports, fashion, and other entertainment or consumer goods—especially relevant in the time of the “economic miracle” [“Wirtschaftswunder”] and the cold war.

## **“TELEVISION KILLED THE NEWSREEL STAR”?**

Television after 1945 inherited newsreels’ role as an audiovisual, filmed newspaper, additionally benefitting from technological enhancements made since the late 1960s in color film. Both filmic audiovisual genres, newsreels and television, are sources for the historical study of cultural and societal changes, of paradigm shifts, in which they participated or of which they were the result. They allow insights into our recent past, a past which is marked by the transition from the modern period—photojournalism, newsreel and early television—towards a post-modern and late capitalistic period affected by new media like video and the advent of the Internet. Television, inheriting the task of news and information formats as well as that of shaping cultural identities after the 1960s, anticipated what video and particularly MTV did with radio in 1981, in marking a media-based paradigm shift, a media cesura: “Video Killed the Radio Star” (The Buggles 1979).

Yet newsreel continues to participate in the processes of archive building and the transformation and deconstruction effects of media in general, remediating the aesthetics of other media such as photojournalism, (documentary) film and radio. And it was and is still being remediated itself in (documentary) film, or in television—the very medium which eventually replaced the newsreel.

Many of the aesthetic forms which today are typically associated with televisual documentaries and news segments were developed in and strongly influenced by newsreels. Much of the archived newsreel footage itself continues to be used in a variety of television programs, both to illustrate and restage past events, passing over or rewriting our understandings of their significance. Within this remediation of newsreel reportages, very often they are stripped off their original context, the specific commentaries, and perhaps even dissociated from the voiceover or soundtracks with which they were originally broadcast.

Newsreels thus not only played a paramount role in forming the audiovisual narratives of diverse “Biopics of the Nation” (cf. Imesch/Lutz/

Lüscher 2011), thereby re-consolidating cultural, political and religious communities, but in many ways continue to either perpetuate or reinterpret such collective identifications in contemporary media. Consequently, the newsreel archives demonstrate both the format's medial qualities and deconstruct a 'natural history' of the media.

## COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES

While working on the project with a focus on Switzerland, it became evident that the project would have to be contextualized in diverse ways.<sup>9</sup> A comparison of the structures, aspects of institutionalization and functions in different European countries promises to offer deeper insight into the differences and similarities of the medial production and use of newsreels from historically and culturally diverse perspectives, while remaining cognizant of differing availability of sources from different countries, gaps in the databases, and that different archival practices might prevent access to the original composition of newsreels reportages.

Drawing from several methodological approaches within the diverse field of cultural and media studies, this book aims to discuss historical, theoretical, medial, aesthetical and political aspects of newsreels in particular and audiovisual formats in general. The choices of the case studies presented allow for a comparative perspective on constructions of cultural identities in the countries addressed.

The chapters discuss both state-controlled and private formats, recent televisual programs from different countries and linguistic areas, as well as documentary and popular film. Special attention is paid to newsreels addressing cultural and artistic topics and their subsequent transition into "Culture Television" (cf. Borer 2013). Finally, emphasis is put on the technical, aesthetical, and political challenges of archiving and restaging news-

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9 An international symposium on "Constructions of Cultural Identities in Newsreel, Cinema and Television after 1945" was held in 2012 at the University of Lausanne in collaboration with the Institute for Cultural Studies in the Arts, Zurich University of the Arts; selected talks are included in this volume. We thank the aforementioned institutions and especially the Swiss National Foundation for its support.

reels and television, not least in today's age of digital (inter-)media and their accelerated distribution, reproduction, and manipulation.

The book is also dedicated to a particular aspect of the newsreel medium, the relevant feature of its cinematic hybrid between documentary and fiction genre and its decisive claim of so-called 'authenticity'. Both aspects supported newsreels' success as a 'news'-medium, shaped the dynamics of its narratives, and contributed to our continuous perception of the medium as an eminent source of visual cultural and social history and memory.

**Samuel Sieber's** essay "The Politics of Archives. Media, Power, and Identity" opens the first chapter, "Constructions of Cultural Identities in Newsreel". Using selected examples from Swiss Newsreel, he discusses the political power and potency of newsreel as a media archive. By introducing two different conceptions of archives coined by Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, he shows how newsreel's ability to construct identities builds and depends on the selective assembly of the articulable and visible. Yet both Swiss Newsreel's evident self-staging and self-thematization as a medium, and the governmental discourses or nationalistic images it features, are subject to constant re-presentations and transformations. In the technological and discursive senses, the newsreel archives therefore mark a substantially political mediality of old and new media.

In his essay "The Creation of Cultural Identity through Weekly Newsreels in Germany in the 1950s" **Knut Hickethier** explores the generation of cultural and national identity through newsreels in post-war Germany, particularly by the NEUE DEUTSCHE WOCHENSCHAU [NEW GERMAN NEWSREEL] in its context of the film business. Many of the NDW's contemporary features revolve thematically around the reconstruction of Germany, forming a grand narrative aimed at fostering a sense of social and national cohesion. Constructing the story of a restored and increasingly prosperous West Germany often implied painting a negative image of the German Democratic Republic, which likewise produced negative narratives of the West; both sides using particularly emotional visuals, metaphoric image material, and cunning dramatic composition techniques.

In her article "West German State Newsreels in the Period of the Economic Miracle 1950-1964. Gender as an open approach", **Uta Schwarz** introduces gender as an important analytical category of social history into the research on the West German government's newsreels in the period of the "patriarchal democracy and economic miracle". Her analysis of the

filmic and narrative structure, the topical content, their combination and the dramaturgic operations which gave the single reports a specific space within a unified whole, shows not only how stereotypical concepts of femininity and masculinity in the West German society were implicitly and explicitly negotiated in the newsreels. Uta Schwarz's analysis also demonstrates how gender stereotyping relates to national production and consumption; referencing gendered film aesthetics as a dispositive, the newsreel continues to mark the gendered concepts of cultural identities as well as the newsreels' gendered aesthetics.

**Hilde Hoffmann's** essay "The Visual Memory of the Cold War. The Long Afterlife of the FOX TÖNENDE WOCHENSCHAU Newsreels on the Building of the Berlin Wall" traces the role of the German newsreel FTW, established as a commercial newsreel by the US-American 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox after World War II, in generating an ongoing collective visual memory of the Cold War and the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961. Hilde Hoffmann's analysis shows how the newsreel produced and constructed images of the good 'self' (addressing a Western 'We' as defenders of freedom) and the evil 'alien' (Russian and GDR associated with National Socialism). Its images of the building of the Berlin Wall had a decontextualized afterlife when they were circulated after the reunification of Germany in the ten years anniversary of German Unity media events in 1999, as historical documents in a new unifying narrative of Germany's history of overcoming suffering.

**Catalina Ravessoud's** and **Gianni Haver's** contribution "Art Exhibitions through Newsreels. An Avatar for Identity Politics (1945-1960)" links the first and second chapter. The essay's focus is the comparative study of newsreel reports on exemplary art exhibitions from France, Germany, Italy and Spain between 1945 and 1960. The authors discuss how art exhibitions were reported in newsreels as "avatars" for identity politics in specific historical and national contexts, especially through restaging and remediating the exhibition as a politically charged event which gains its meaning through the presence of national and international political authorities. During the first years after the war in French and German newsreels reports on the restitution of art works, for example, are used to document a return to 'normality'. The authors show how in later reports national identity politics draw symbolic capital from the international, universal value attributed to

modern art, and how around 1960 a shift in newsreels can be observed towards reports on art exhibitions allowing for more individual interpretation.

The second chapter, entitled “Art and Culture in Newsreel, Cinema, and Television,” opens with **Kornelia Imesch**’s article “Jean Tinguely & Le Corbusier in Swiss Weekly Film Newsreels and Television. Medial Rhetorics—Medial Discourses.” Imesch analyzes the different strategies of reporting on two diversely debated protagonists of Swiss architecture and art: Le Corbusier and Jean Tinguely. In the newsreel and television of the Swiss Postwar period, both artists appear in narrations constructing differing and even conflicting identification patterns within Swiss cultural identity. Her analysis shows how television inherited and reformed the preceding newsreel while at the same time opened its rhetoric by involving its audience via audio-visual presentation. The two media are linked to different discourses and dispositifs and their underlying ideological differences.

In his essay “Fiction and Newsreel Documentary in Godard’s Cinema” **Pietro Giovannoli** shows how the tensions between the techniques and the aesthetics of newsreels and documentary films and those of fiction had been at the center of Godard’s reflections in his (documentary) films as well as in his theoretical writing. Godard’s filmic practices, Giovannoli argues, undermine the separation of documentary and fictional material. Godard’s journalistic cinema addressed actualities (in 1954 the building of a dam, in the 1960s prostitution in France or the war in Algeria, later the Americanization of Europe, the Vietnam war, the students and worker protests in 1968, third world conflicts and colonialism) while experimenting in complex ways with documentary essays and fiction. Coming from a Marxist revolutionary perspective, the struggle for a critique of the “cinematic language” of journalism and mainstream cinema was imbedded in a political analysis of the ideological effects of both, documentary and fiction, as a language of power. For Godard at least in the 1960s, the project of a national (French) cinema able to resist the universalization of the US film industry would not have to be nationalist itself.

While examining the interaction of negotiating religious identity—understood as a cultural practice—, migration and contemporary Swiss documentary film, **Marie-Therese Mäder** shows in her essay “Between Migration and Integration” how documentaries provide a specific form of cultural space in which production, representation and communication are intertwined, and where individuals and groups reflect upon religion, be-

longing and identity. She focuses on two rather differing Swiss documentaries (*BETWEEN TWO WORLDS*, Yusuf Yesilöz, CH 2006, and *OUR GARDEN EDEN* Mano Khalil CH 2010), both made by immigrants, and coproduced and distributed by the Swiss national television channel SRF, which raise questions about the borders and the formation of cultural-religious identities and processes of integration and exclusion under the condition of migration. As her analysis shows, filmmakers, social actors and audiences can become active protagonists in documentary formats, drawing and negotiating their own boundaries within notions of Swiss and other cultures, thus contributing diverse and new perspectives to never fixed concepts of cultural, religious, and national constructions of identities.

**Nadja Borer's** contribution "Re-marking of Differences: Culture Television and Art Interplaying. Variability of Cultural Magazines and their Heterogeneous Dispositions" discusses the complex interrelations between televisual cultural magazines and art events. Cultural television, close to the the newsreel in so far as it provides an additive structure of framed segments of cultural 'information' and entertainment, continually interprets and translates socio-cultural activities of a society, processing the myths of a society into extensive mythologies. Since the introduction of private broadcasters in the mid-1980s, commercials became even more important. Addressing a broader consumer public in the 1990s, entertainment and advertisement design—such as the magazine *KULTURPLATZ* of Swiss Television—reshaped the studio design even of cultural magazines. Television generally re-visualizes images and other media integrated into different daily practices, thus representing these media practices too. Borer's analysis shows how cultural television as a medium also may develop art representations and re-appropriations, which reflect upon the making of the art and put aesthetical difference on display.

In his contribution "Constructing an Emancipated Culture of Art Spectatorship? The Ambiguity of Ben Lewis's Reportage-Series *ART SAFARI* (2003-2006)," **Marcel Bleuler** discusses the art reportage series that was co-produced by several West European television channels as a format criticizing "educational culture television". Bleuler's analysis shows how the series is operating in the identification and construction as well as in interpretation and transmission of knowledge about art and culture. Audio-visual strategies that do not reveal their own conditionality and are based on ambivalence regarding the intellectual autonomy of their supposed specta-

tors can undermine the authoritarian gestures typical of mainstream art worlds. The implications of such a strategy of educational television may be seen in an empowerment of a new emancipated spectatorship distant from traditional modes of authoritarian instruction.

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