

BEGINNINGS

A Portrait of Locarno as Remembered by its Guests

In the weeks leading up to the Festival, we reached out to some of Locarno's most illustrious former guests and asked them to share their first memories of the fest – whether that meant impressions from their world premieres or casual walks around the lake. The result, *Beginnings*, is a treasure trove of anecdotes and recollections; a polyphonic mosaic of the Festival assembled by those who've shaped its history.

Silvan Zürcher, 1990s



The first time I went to Locarno was in the mid-'90s, when I was still a student, as a participant in "Cinema e Gioventù" – the Locarno Film Festival's Youth Jury. It was the art teacher with whom my brother and I always discussed films who drew our attention to the program. I remember the first time we made the pilgrimage to the Piazza Grande, with a group of around 15 people. We were all very excited, almost awestruck, to see this legendary place for the first time. I can still dimly remember that in the movie we watched afterwards – it was probably the opening film – a man swam through a stormy sea. I don't remember whether he was fleeing or swimming to freedom, or whether he was an athlete looking for some kind of rush. This scene – a man crawling through untamed masses of water – is my oldest Locarno memory. Every now and then I decide to look up the movie – but something always stops me. Perhaps I like the fact that I no longer remember; that I no longer know the motive behind his swimming. It remains a mystery to me. And with all the blurriness and imprecisions this scene has accrued ever since, it now seems strangely rich to me... That first summer in Locarno was the beginning of a love affair that continues to this day: with the festival, with the festival experience, with films. Since then, countless other experiences have been indelibly etched into my memory and I look forward to the many more fires Locarno will ignite, and which will also blur from year to year – like the swimmer in the roaring sea

Ramon Zürcher, 1990s



I went Locarno for the first time at the age of 17 to take part in the "Cinema e Gioventù" program together with my brother and a friend. Locarno cast such a spell over us that the three of us returned to the festival again and again in the years that followed. Fortunately, we soon got to know the person in charge of a public playground, who allowed us to pitch our two tents in an open tree house in the forest during the festival. He said we could do this every year from then on if we let him know in good time. I still remember well how we wrote a handwritten letter every year to announce our arrival. Email and cell phones weren't common back then. And so Locarno became an adventure every year. We looked forward to swimming in the Maggia, to the little open wooden house and to the many films and encounters. There was something wild and free about life, but also something structured about the movie showtimes we didn't want to miss. I still remember the sound of raindrops on the tents and the sound of the hedgehogs that once crept around our tents at night. I have never heard that strange sound since. The memories of our tents and the wooden hut come back to me whenever I walk from FEVI through the forest to the Maggia. I wander through the woods, happy and wistful in equal measure, and see three ghosts closing their tents to disappear into the world of the next movie.

Der Spatz im Kamin (*The Sparrow in the Chimney*), the new film by the Zürchers, premieres Saturday, 10.8.2024 at 14:00 at Palexpo (FEVI)

HOW THE LEOPARD GOT ITS SPOTS

From Tourism to Cinephilia

By Cyril Cordoba

For this year's edition of *Pardo*, we invited historians Cyril Cordoba and Lucia Leoni to take us daily on a tour through the Locarno Film Festival's history, chapter by chapter.

What we know today as the Locarno Film Festival was launched in 1941 as an event dedicated to Italian cinema – not in Locarno, but Lugano! When the fifth edition was cancelled at the last minute in 1946 – after Lugano's population voted against building permanent structures for the event – it was hastily relocated. On the evening of August 22, 1946, 1,200 spectators gathered for Giacomo Gentilomo's *O Sole Mio* (*My Sun*) in the garden of Locarno's Grand Hotel, and a new chapter in Swiss film culture was opened.

In its early years, the LFF was structured as a primarily social event, drawing tourists with commercial films such as the popular comedy *Don Camillo* (1952). However, it also featured the works of renowned artists such as Sergei Eisenstein and was a showcase for Neorealism, among other burgeoning film movements. Locarno would also become one of the first Western film festivals to welcome movies from the Socialist Bloc – particularly East Germany – earning a reputation for being a place of "peaceful coexistence" amid growing Cold War tensions, where the films of John Wayne could share billing with Chinese or Polish productions. Nevertheless, Switzerland was a deeply anticommunist country, and even the programming of films such as *The Cranes are Flying* (*Letyat zhuravli*) – Mikhail Kalatozov's 1957 masterpiece, which received the Palme d'Or at Cannes – was deeply controversial.

Contrary to Venezia, Cannes, Berlin and many others, the Locarno Film Festival was not controlled nor funded by the government. Its creation was not a "top-down" political initiative, but a local, "grassroots" one. That meant that the LFF wasn't constrained by diplomatic incentives in selecting or awarding participants – and yet the lack of governmental support also made things difficult for the organizers, who consequently lacked valuable leverage in their negotiations with industry folks. Commercial disputes with Swiss distributors and exhibitors resulted in the Festival being cancelled in 1951 and again in 1956. This apparent instability meant that there was a real threat that another town might successfully petition to "steal" the privately operated event – after all, as the people of Lugano knew, that had already happened once!

The Festival's future was secured, however, with the Swiss government's official recognition of Locarno as a "national event" in 1954. Moreover, in 1959, the LFF was "crowned" as an A-list festival by the FIAPF (International Federation of Film Producers Association), which ruled the international film festival circuit. This certification, together with the organization of UNESCO-sponsored youth cinema events and high-profile retrospectives of auteurs such as Akira Kurosawa (mounted in collaboration with the Cinémathèque Suisse, or Swiss Film Archives), proved that Locarno, over the span of its first 15 years, was slowly but surely becoming a Mecca for cinephiles.

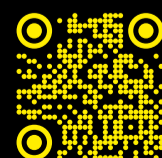


Grand Hotel Locarno, date unknown, © E. Steinemann



Grand Hotel Locarno, 1947, © E. Steinemann

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1946-1959

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Pedro Costa, 2000



In 2000, the Locarno Film Festival chose to present *In Vanda's Room*. It seemed to me the ideal place for this film: not too fictional, not too documentary, not too chic, not too frivolous... And I remember the jurors declaring it poorly made; a disgusting film.

I also remember many young people coming to talk to me. In Locarno, in 2000, I began a nasty affair with those who judge films and a steady courtship with the young spectators.

Denis Côté, 2005



Outside of a handful of short film festivals and a freakish FIPRESCI jury at MoscowIFF, I didn't have much international festival experience. Locarno seemed like an unknown and mysterious place for the international premiere of our DIY low budget experiment called *Drifting States*. As a small but excited delegation of four, we stayed in a small hostel-like but perfectly located hotel: the infamous Dell'Angelo; grumpy restaurant staff included. The old-timers will remember the huge festival parties at the Locarno Grand Hotel. Sadly, it closed just weeks after we all got drunk there. These days, amidst rumors of renovations and a reopening, urban exploration fanatics are hopefully keeping the memory of this place alive.

Far away from the glamorous competition, I screened my film, programmed in the now-defunct Video Competition sidebar, at the discreet PalaVideo in Muralto. I left days after that premiere, but was then surreally rushed back to Locarno 24 hours after my return to Montreal. Jumping onto the Piazza Grande stage to receive the sidebar's Pardo d'Oro remains one of the most special moments of my career. At that time, I had just left my job as a film critic at a local newspaper. I was unemployed and severely doubting what might come next. Caressing the Leopard was like an epiphany: I had to go on with my projects and filmmaking.

I owe this first and special opportunity to two lovely souls who were part of my filmmaking journey: Agnès Wildenstein and Luciano Barisone, both in the programming committee at the time. 19 years later, I don't forget.

■ *Jours avant la mort de Nicky* (*Days Before the Death of Nicky*), Denis Côté's latest short, premieres Thursday, 15.8 at 14:30 at La Sala

■ Marta Mateus's *Fogo do Vento* (*Fire of Wind*), produced by Pedro Costa, premieres Tuesday, 13.8 at 14:00 at Palexpo (FEVI)

HOW THE LEOPARD GOT ITS SPOTS

Anticommunism in Switzerland

By Cyril Cordoba

For this year's edition of *Pardo*, we invited historians Cyril Cordoba and Lucia Leoni to take us daily on a tour through the Locarno Film Festival's history, chapter by chapter.

In the 1960s, the Locarno Film Festival was steered by Vinicio Beretta, a film critic who had been a big part of the Festival since its early days. In the decade before, he served as both secretary and head of the selection committee; before that, he had presided over the awards ceremonies in the garden of the Grand Hotel. As director, Beretta fought hard – often against tourism promoters and industry representatives, who had a vested interest in prioritizing commercial cinema – to transform the LFF into a cultural event dedicated to the promotion of film culture.

Because Hollywood was largely uninterested in sending movies to Locarno – the Swiss market being such a small one – while Eastern European countries were very keen on using the Festival as a political showcase, the LFF became the site of a kind of cinematic Cold War. Alongside Poland and Hungary, Czechoslovakia, where a new wave of young filmmakers was emerging amid de-Stalinization, had a particularly strong presence in Ticino. A number of Nová vlna films were awarded at Locarno, including Miloš Forman's *Black Peter* (*Černý Petr*, 1964). Locarno was one of the few places in Western Europe where these subversively youthful and highly influential movies could be seen: in Switzerland, their influence was manifest even in the creation of a production house named Milos-Films.

The Festival's platforming of productions from socialist countries generated quite a bit of hostility in anticommunist Switzerland, however. Its most ferocious adversaries were so influential that, in 1962, a government-approved "national selection committee" with a mandate to reject films deemed overly "political" was installed. Things got personal, too: a xenophobic slander campaign was launched against Festival Director Beretta, who was Italian and had only recently become a Swiss citizen. As a result, he suffered a nervous breakdown, eventually quitting the Festival in 1966.

Nevertheless, the LFF managed to preserve the space for artistic and political provocation it had carved out. With financial support from the state, the Festival became a hub for emerging cinema. Young auteurs were given the chance to show their films to international audiences for the first time: the likes of Claude Chabrol, Lina Wertmüller, Stanley Kubrick, Henry Brandt, Shirley Clarke, and Marco Bellocchio all used the Locarno Film Festival as a springboard early in their careers. Showcasing emerging cinema also meant programming the work of more experienced filmmakers from so-called "Third World" countries, completely unknown to Swiss spectators at the time. Mexican, Indian, and Brazilian films were introduced to our country thanks to Locarno, which celebrated such important figures as Luis Alcoriza, Satyajit Ray, and Nelson Pereira dos Santos. New and exciting cinematic avenues were being pursued in Locarno, despite economic and political constraints – paving the way for the even more radical filmmakers of the late '60s and '70s.

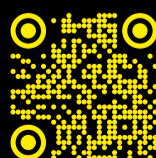


The screen set up on the lawn of the Grand Hotel, 1965



Audience gathered at the Grand Hotel, 1960

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1960-1966

BEGINNINGS

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Maya Da-Rin, 2009



I was in Locarno for the first time in 2009 to present *Lands* in a program that is no longer part of the festival: Here and Elsewhere, a name borrowed from Anne-Marie Miéville and Jean-Luc Godard's 1976 film about Palestinian resistance. It was a beautiful summer day and I sat on the lawn around Lago Maggiore to watch the movie-goers sunbathe. Next to me was a man with long gray hair, reading a copy of this very same publication you are holding in your hands. Something about him caught my attention and I took a photo of him; he didn't notice. When I returned to Brazil and downloaded the photos, I realized this person was Eugène Green, who had presented *The Portuguese Nun* at the festival that year. To this day, I remember the feeling of watching a film by Eugène for the first time: that, in the cinema, words need to be said with precision so that they can leave an impression on the spectators' memory.

Recently, I was talking to a friend about a certain homogenization we see in contemporary theater and how rare it is to watch a play in which the actors are able to make themselves heard. We commented about how, today in Brazil, evangelical churches and their pastors play a role that once belonged to theater and cinema – not by chance, many theaters have been converted into neo-Pentecostal temples. My friend recalled a phrase by Pasolini, who said that the audience will fully appreciate the actor's work when, "hearing the actor speak, they recognize that the actor has understood the text." What we take away from a play or a movie is not so much what we can perceive from a certain story, but the feeling that the actors intimately understand what they are telling. I returned to Locarno 10 years later to present my second feature film, *The Fever*, accompanied by actors Rosa Peixoto and Regis Myrupu – who, at the end of the festival, would receive the Leopard for Best Actor. It was the first time we watched the film together and I remember that, for much of the screening, I preferred to close my eyes so as to just hear how the words of the Tukano language resonated in the crowded movie theater. At a time when people's narratives are increasingly up for grabs, film festivals are like temples of resistance, just as indigenous populations have taught us for centuries how to resist colonialism in Latin America. Here and Elsewhere.

Alessandro Comodin, 2011



It hasn't been that many years, yet I have only very few memories of the first time I set foot in Locarno; they are more like flashes, as if the trip had happened in my childhood. Yes, come to think of it, that's how I want to remember my first time in Locarno: I was a child, seven or eight years old. Everything seemed big to me, spectacular; there were so many people I knew. I'm not sure if they were known to the general public, but for the child I was then, I felt like I was in a place only grown-ups had access to.

As if by magic, I'd wandered out at night to a party all by myself, without my parents. It's not normal to go out at night alone when you are seven or eight, I can assure you. But that's how I felt in Locarno in 2011.

There were people greeting me and shaking my hand, which I politely reciprocated with a smile. But I don't remember who I greeted, except for one: Enrico Ghezzi. If you don't know him, well, for the child I was then, in the world of my personal cinema, he was one of the most important people. I said almost nothing, pretended I was a grown-up, too, then ran away.

One morning, my three best friends with whom I'd made the film I was at the festival with, *Summer of Giacomo*, arrived in Locarno. Surprise! They rang the doorbell with a bottle of bubbly wine. My parents also came, and so did my sister and Giacomino, who played the film's protagonist. It seemed that our film had won the award, the cool one, the golden one. Ah, what a beautiful morning that was! I didn't understand much of anything, but that was the beginning of a great party.

HOW THE LEOPARD GOT ITS SPOTS

A Revolution in Locarno?

By Cyril Cordoba

For this year's edition of *Pardo*, we invited historians Cyril Cordoba and Lucia Leoni to take us daily on a tour through the Locarno Film Festival's history, chapter by chapter.

Political unrest characterized the late 1960s, in Switzerland as much as the rest of the world. For the Locarno Film Festival, this period offered an opportunity to break with tradition. At the time, the festival was directed by Sandro Bianconi, a professor involved in the local film club, and Freddy Buache, director of the Cinémathèque suisse (Swiss Film Archive). Together, they worked to further specialize the LFF in emerging cinema and make it a home for Swiss cinephiles. To that end, they made two radical decisions: firstly, to end the open-air screenings in the Grand Hotel's garden, emblematic of the Festival as a glamorous entertainment destination, and secondly, to move the event from summer to autumn, in order to attract more of the local students rather than the usual tourists. With the revolts of May 1968 and the subsequent cancellation of the Cannes Film Festival, protest was growing in Ticino, too. In March, students occupied Locarno's *Scuola normale*; at the Festival that October, just after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, the Czechoslovak New Wave pioneer Jiří Menzel stepped down from his post as a juror, refusing to judge any films from the Warsaw Pact countries – and, in an act of solidarity, his fellow international jury members followed suit. Though they were replaced by the Youth Jury, the closing ceremony in the Kursaal was still disrupted by young spectators, who denounced Locarno as too bourgeois. Rather than call the police, directors Bianconi and Buache let them discuss their positions late into the night.

Revolt was also on the rise on the big screen, with provocative new sounds and images emerging from psychedelic pop culture, as in The Beatles' animated surrealist caper, *Yellow Submarine* (1968), as well as out of more intellectual movements, such as the New German Cinema. Meanwhile, postcolonial fables like *Soleil Ô* (1970) and anti-imperialist pictures like *Biladi, a Revolution* (*Biladi, une révolution*, 1970) stirred cinephiles and activists alike. Third Cinema, a highly politicized filmmaking ideology rooted in Latin America that denounced European auteurism alongside Hollywood entertainment, stoked audiences with such incendiary offerings as *Entranced Earth* (*Terra em Transe*, 1967), *The Hour of the Furnaces* (*La Hora de los Hornos*, 1968), and *Three Sad Tigers* (*Tres tristes tigres*, 1968).

However, Bianconi and Buache's radical programming was not appreciated by everyone. In addition to being labeled as "crypto-communist" within Switzerland, the LFF acquired a reputation for being too intellectual and repulsive to tourists. Disappointed by this reaction, both directors quit after four years. In 1971, a compromise was reached by a provisional committee: the Festival would return to the summertime and the open-air screenings would resume. In place of the Grand Hotel garden, however, a venue that was both familiar to locals and very attractive to cinephiles and tourism promoters was recruited: the Piazza Grande.

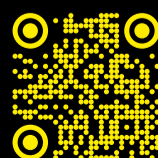


Entrance Rex, 1971 ©Film Festival Locarno



Entrance Piazza Grande, 1971 ©Film Festival Locarno

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1967-1971

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Ben Russell, 2013



I came to Locarno for the first time to screen *A Spell to Ward off the Darkness*, a film that I co-directed with my good friend Ben Rivers. I arrived via Helsinki via Kittilä, having spent a few days traveling deep beneath the earth's mosquito-covered surface in a series of Finnish gold mines, scouting out locations for a film called *Good Luck* that would bring me back to Locarno a second time four years later. I arrived on the day of our film's premiere, which was in a cinema called PalaVideo that was memorable for its red seats and its incredibly steep incline – and for the tendency of its ushers to occasionally shine flashlights upwards onto the screen. I'm sure they did it just once or twice, directing late viewers to the rafters above, but after all of that nervous energy that comes with finally presenting a film to the public, I couldn't help but think how those ushers were already doing our film's job of pushing away the darkness, LOL.

It always takes me a while to properly see a film after I've released it into the world – my attention remains in the unresolved technical details, the uncertainty of proper sound levels, the collective exhalations of an audience that I've never been with in a cinema before. Our film was part of a new non-competitive section called Fuori Concorso Signs of Life that Carlo Chatrian had just created. Ben and I were of course honored to be among the new gatekeepers, happy to finally have the film out in the ether, excited and maybe a little bit disappointed that nobody in the audience booed after the closing, 25-minute long black metal sequence – which is a result that we'd imagined at some point during our editing process. I'm sure there was a Q&A but I can't remember it – and I'm sure that we both felt relieved and excited, and a bit outside of everything.

After I left the cinema dark and reassembled my nerves, I eventually found my way to Ponte Brolla and climbed down into the gorge with some friends. We sat on an outcropping of smooth rock and watched in occasional awe as young shirtless men lazily launched themselves off cliffs and into the freezing waters of the Maggia below. The divers were silent, the watchers tight-lipped – as if all of us had been trained by a life in the cinema to be still, expectant. Some 15 minutes into our collective motion picture, the steady sound of rocks clattering off the granite walls began to echo through the gorge – though the lack of any kind of gesture led us all to eventually realize that what we were hearing was in fact *gunshots* – pulsing out over the walls of the canyon from a shooting range some 500 meters away. The effect was so startling and so surreal that it acted as a non-event – as some kind of non-diegetic soundtrack that left the divers unaffected and their audience unmoved. The water continued its race through the gorge, the young men striking poses on the granite cliffs above.

We had a second screening in PalaVideo and a third, press screening in Kursaal – I swam in a lake dusted with swan feathers, saw *Manakamana* in an inflatable cinema and *Fitzcarraldo* on a screen so big there was a time-delay, gave interviews, and drank with friends and ate over-priced food and nightly fell asleep exhausted from marveling at the world we all inhabited, at the worlds we were making out of it.

Ben Rivers, 2013



In 2013, Ben Russell and I made a film together called *A Spell to Ward off the Darkness* – a film which grew out of a long friendship, a film tour we called *We Can Not Live in This World Alone*, and many shared fascinations and questions about how best to live in the world. Our premiere was at Locarno in a new [Fuori Concorso] section called Signs of Life, named after the early Herzog film, which I thought was good provenance. It was raining hard when we arrived, those tropical-like walls of water that sometimes happen in Locarno. The cinema we showed in had a nice rake, good and steep, so nobody's head got in the way, but it was a little bright, because of lights on the stairway that couldn't be turned off, so Ben and I worried some of the darkness in the film was already being expelled. In the end those things are usually only noticed by the filmmakers, all the technical worries that most people aren't seeing or interested in. Even though it's exciting to watch a film for the first time with an audience, it's also nerve-wracking and hard to remember much, there's too many thoughts going on in my head. I do remember the general vibe being good, we were both happy, in need of a drink. After the screening a critic said the film was a "head-fuck" and meant it in a positive way. That was followed by more in-depth reviews. I went for a lone swim in the lake that night, after all the drinking and talking. I really wanted to see one of my childhood heroes, Christopher Lee, but didn't, neither in the lake nor anywhere else. Ben and I, and some other filmmakers went for a swim in a gorge, a short drive up a mountain. Girls and boys lounged around on rocks in the sun, or jumped in from great heights. We heard gunshots in the air, but couldn't see where they came from. The water was fresh, and it freed my mind from the turmoil that is a film premiere. Eleven years after *A Spell* I'm coming back with *Bogancloch*, the fourth feature I've premiered in Locarno. It's a beautiful place to start the life of a film and ward off the darkness with cinema.

■ *Bogancloch*, Ben Rivers's latest film, screens tonight, 10.08 at 18:00 at L'altra Sala

HOW THE LEOPARD GOT ITS SPOTS

So Scandalous

By Cyril Cordoba

For this year's edition of *Pardo*, we invited historians Cyril Cordoba and Lucia Leoni to take us daily on a tour through the Locarno Film Festival's history, chapter by chapter.

The commencement of screenings at the Piazza Grande catapulted the Locarno Film Festival's popularity in the 1970s. Inaugurated in 1971, the open-air screenings at the center of the 19th-century Lombardian city quickly became the Festival's hallmark. However, this balmy, majestic setting did not preclude the LFF from generating controversy.

Between 1972 and 1977, under the leadership of Erika and Moritz de Hadeln, many films dealing with (homo)sexuality and/or featuring graphic imagery stirred up consternation in Ticino. Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma* (1975) and Nagisa Oshima's *In the Realm of the Senses* (1976) in particular caused quite a ruckus: they were decried as disgusting and lurid by the conservative press and as morally dangerous by Catholic groups. After the so-called "sexual revolution" of '68, more and more films that dealt with changing gender roles came to Locarno – though there was still a sharp bias towards male directors. Only 18 of the 1,712 feature-lengths films that had thus far screened at the Festival (from its launch in 1946 through to 1974) had been directed by women. The International Year of the Woman in 1975 had a brief but meaningful impact on the Festival, at least: in the following years, feminist productions by filmmakers such as Chantal Akerman and Patricia Moraz gained more exposure at Locarno.

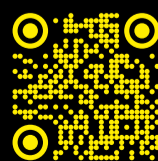
The LFF in this era again exposed the West to new cinematic territories, becoming one of the first European festivals to program works from Middle Eastern and African countries, most notably Syria, Algeria, and Senegal. Meanwhile, a new section called *Tribune libre* (Open Forum, from 1973 to 1979) was created to further Locarno's mission to reveal emerging talents. Curated by three young cinephiles – Theres Scherer, This Brunner, and David Streiff – this program strand helped to cement international enthusiasm for the films of New Hollywood and also served as a platform for daring European auteurs such as Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Marguerite Duras, and Theo Angelopoulos.

After the departure of the de Hadelns in 1978, Locarno entered a period of uncertainty. With the development of VHS and video art, cinema was evolving. Despite some revelations, like Yilmaz Güney's *The Herd* (*Sürü*, 1978), and acclaimed retrospectives such as the one dedicated to Ozu in 1983, the Festival's selections became less daring. Divided between popular comedies like *Die Schweizermacher* (*The Swissmakers*, 1978 – to this day, Switzerland's most successful movie) and auteur cinema, the LFF was also now divided location-wise. Beginning in 1980, competition screenings took place at the Morettina, a school 10 minutes by foot from the city center – a considerable distance, by Swiss standards! – while the Piazza was reserved for the more mainstream pictures. The uncertainty was so pronounced that in 1982, some members of the international jury attempted a coup and decided not to attribute any awards, in the hope that it would force the appointment of a new Festival Director. As film festivals multiplied across Switzerland, it was time for Locarno to burnish its faded identity.



Piazza Grande, 1982 ©Alzono Zirpoli

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1972-1982

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Ryusuke Hamaguchi, 2015



My best memory of the Locarno International Film Festival is, of course, when in 2015 the four actresses who starred in *Happy Hour* won the Best Actress Award together. The program director at the time, Carlo Chatrian, came to visit our dinner (cheese fondue) and let us know about it. Luckily, all the main actresses had come to Locarno, though we had not expected any award and were actually just making plans to return home, so we were so surprised. At the awards ceremony, Sachie Tanaka, who had studied in Germany, gave a speech in German because there was no Japanese interpreter. No one from the Japanese media who was present that night could understand German, so they were confused and asked her to translate what she had said into Japanese. It was a funny moment. I can't forget taking a commemorative photo that night with Bi Gan's *Kaili Blues* (*Lu bian ye can*, 2015) team. Thank you again, Locarno, for all those memories.

Nele Wohlatz, 2016



My first time in Locarno was also my first time attending a major film festival. I had made a film, *The Future Perfect* (*El futuro perfecto*, 2016), with almost no money, and certainly didn't have enough to stay a whole week in Locarno. Together with another film delegation from Argentina, I rented a small apartment in Ascona. The shuttle service between the two cities worked badly. Before traveling to Switzerland from Buenos Aires, an older film director gave me some advice. "Don't worry about staying in Ascona, there's a free e-bike rental in Locarno," he said. "You're meant to give the e-bike back at the end of the day, but they don't mind if you keep it for the whole week."

And so during the seven days I spent at the festival I happily biked up and down the hills between Locarno and Ascona. The weather was nice; the e-bike great. I was a bit stressed about our premiere, but there were many interesting films to watch and people to talk to. Towards the end of the week, I was informed that I would receive a prize during the awards ceremony at the Piazza Grande. A limousine was going to pick me up at the apartment. Since I had to give back the e-bike, I asked the car to pick me up at the bike rental instead.

The rental was tucked inside a white tent. A young woman came outside to pick up my e-bike. When I told her my name to have my ID back, her face dropped and she disappeared inside the tent again. Seconds later a middle-aged man flung the sloppy tent door open as if it were a theater curtain, and dramatically asked: "Who is Nele?" "Me," I said. As he started to shout at me, a black limousine showed up, and a festival volunteer – an "angel", as they were called – asked me to get in. But the man wasn't ready yet. His face had turned red. "You will never ever get an e-bike in Locarno again," he barked. "You will be blacklisted!!" "The ceremony is about to start," the angel kept saying. I apologized to the man and told him I had to go and pick up a Golden Leopard, and hopped into the car.

I still feel a bit bad. If he did send me a fine, it never made it to Argentina. One day I'll have to go back to Locarno and find out if there really is a blacklist.

HOW THE LEOPARD GOT ITS SPOTS

The Biggest of the Small Festivals

By Cyril Cordoba

For this year's edition of *Pardo*, we invited historians Cyril Cordoba and Lucia Leoni to take us daily on a tour through the Locarno Film Festival's history, chapter by chapter.

Locarno's 1980s editions are still remembered vividly by a generation of cinephiles. Poignant screenings such as *La notte di San Lorenzo* (*The Night of the Shooting Stars*) in 1982 – accompanied by actual shooting stars crossing the sky above the Piazza Grande! – are no doubt engraved in the memory of those who were present. It was over the course of this decade that the Locarno Film Festival embraced the identity by which we know it today: the world capital of auteur cinema. Under the direction of David Streiff, it grew considerably, acquiring a reputation as "the biggest of the small festivals". In 1982, attendance was estimated at 20,000, but by 1985, it had shot up to 80,000. This transformation was fueled by private sector partnerships and support – and again by the construction of the FEVI theater (Palexpo) in 1988, which considerably increased audience capacity.

The Festival's visual identity got a sleek makeover in this decade too. With the lion – the heraldic symbol of the city of Locarno – having been claimed by the Venice Film Festival as its own mascot, in 1982 the LFF picked the leopard, already the namesake of its prizes, as its official trademark. Black and yellow spread throughout the city: appearing on staff clothing and in shop windows, on promotional material and even urban infrastructure. This was not only a publicity stunt, but also a political statement: after decades of crises and controversies, the Festival had earned its place in Locarno's cultural heritage. It was here to stay.

Between 1983 and 1987, Locarno became a place for new, experimental formats, thanks in part to a section dedicated to TV movies. The Festival also began to publish monographs dedicated to each retrospective, while continuing to welcome films representing national cinemas in transformation, from countries such as Brazil, Iran, Burkina Faso, and Mali. Of these, the most memorable breakout was Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth* (*Huang tu di*, 1984) in 1985, which heralded the arrival of China's so-called "Fifth Generation", the first wave of Chinese films to garner recognition on the international film festival circuit. That same year, Locarno also programmed Edward Yang's *Taipei Story* (*Qing mei zhu ma*, 1985), a seminal film of the burgeoning Taiwanese New Wave. In the wake of the success of these films at Locarno, the People's Republic of China and Taiwan would regularly send significant new works to the Festival, Zhang Yimou's *Red Sorghum* (*Hong gao liang*, 1988) amongst them.

Auteurs were also emerging in the United States: independent filmmakers such as Spike Lee and Jim Jarmusch started their international careers at Locarno – and European directors like Wim Wenders and Aki Kaurismäki benefited similarly from the Festival's enthusiasm for auteur cinema. However, films made by women went almost completely unawarded at the Festival throughout the entire decade, despite the progress in representation made in the 1970s. Was this regression a reflection of some kind of cultural backlash? Either way, it wouldn't be until the new millennium that women would again play a prominent role at Locarno. In the '90s, however, the Festival's gaze would be concentrated on the East.

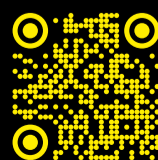


Audience at a late night screening in the Piazza, 1991 © Delay



A close-up of the Piazza Grande screen, 1991 © Delay

Do you have any memories or anecdotes from Locarno you'd like to share?



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1982-1991

BEGINNINGS

A Portrait of Locarno as Remembered by its Guests

In the weeks leading up to the Festival, we reached out to some of Locarno's most illustrious former guests and asked them to share their first memories of the fest – whether that meant impressions from their world premieres or casual walks around the lake. The result, *Beginnings*, is a treasure trove of anecdotes and recollections; a polyphonic mosaic of the Festival assembled by those who've shaped its history.

Annemarie Jacir, 2017



I wasn't physically in Locarno, but in 2003, my short film *Like Twenty Impossibles* was. I can't remember why I didn't attend – maybe they weren't inviting short film directors? I don't know – but I was very happy to be part of the festival, especially at that time, when there were so few Palestinian voices out there and I felt proud to be able to share one of our stories. But one of my fondest Locarno memories is of course the premiere of my feature film, *Wajib* in 2017. It was just incredible to be able to be there with my producer, Ossama Bawardi, my cast, Mohammad Bakri and Saleh Bakri, and my own parents. It was the first time they'd followed me to a festival, which made it a particularly poignant and meaningful moment. And it was such a *huge* premiere! I forget the name of the venue, but to be in front of thousands and thousands of people to unveil the film was extremely moving and important for me...

I have a funny memory from that time: some days after the premiere, I was standing in line for a film, and I heard a woman behind me talk about *Wajib* to someone else. She was going on and on about the film, saying all kinds of nice things about it, and encouraging this person to catch the next screening. And I was standing right in front of her, listening, listening, listening... until I finally turned around. She recognized me and let out a yelp – which was very nice!

Wajib won three prizes at Locarno that year; it was so special to share the film with my family in town and to feel such a warm reception from the audience. I remember one of the prizes in particular – it was from this group that came to the hotel I was staying at to present me with a plaque. The man who gave me the award also offered me a beautiful photograph of Jean Genet at a demonstration in '60s Paris. He'd written about *Wajib* and presented me with his piece as well as the prize. It's probably the sweetest award I've ever received, both in terms of how it was presented and how personal it was.

Finally, I must confess that I hate to be in front of the camera, and hate to be photographed, but there was this French photographer who took pictures of us – Ossama, Mohammad, Saleh, and I – for an article in *Télérama*, if I'm not mistaken. The one he took of me was by the river; it's the only picture of myself I like. I don't know how to reach him, but I'd love to have that photograph!

Dominga Sotomayor, 2018



Things I remember from Locarno 2018: I floated on the lake with an eclectic group of critics and filmmakers. We walked with Demian, the star of my film, *Too Late to Die Young* (*Tarde Para Morir Joven*), taking photos of us washed ashore in the sand. That film was his last as a woman and now he was nervously getting ready to present it as a man, post-transition. Blurry images and the bright photograph of a person floating in the water. The huge room full of people at the premiere. The feeling that the film has a thousand parts left over. A small bar packed with people after the screening. A new friend with whom I toured the city for the first time. A classic watch I saw and liked in a store and jokingly promised to give myself if I won a prize. The night we wandered into a bar and an Argentinean filmmaker told me that they were calling the winners. My phone had been out of battery for hours and a bartender charged it for me. I was crossing the Piazza Grande moments later when Carlo Chatrian called me to tell me I had won "something". That night, from the stage, about to receive the award, I saw Hong Sangsoo sitting in the first row and got nervous. I will never forget the date: August 11, my grandfather's birthday – he had passed away eight years prior without seeing any of my feature films. I returned to Chile with the watch I bought at that little store, a Swiss Army knife as a gift, and the crumpled dress from that night – that's now hanging in my closet and which I've never worn again.

HOW THE LEOPARD GOT ITS SPOTS

Go East, Go Big

By Lucia Leoni

For this year's edition of *Pardo*, we invited historians Cyril Cordoba and Lucia Leoni to take us daily on a tour through the Locarno Film Festival's history, chapter by chapter.

In the '90s, Locarno foregrounded Chinese cinema. This was in part a continuation of the work of David Streiff, the Festival's artistic director from 1983 – 1991, but it was really the doing of his successor, Marco Müller. A trained Sinologist, Müller had curated the landmark 1982 retrospective *Ombre elettrica* in Turin, one of the first in Europe entirely dedicated to Chinese cinema – the title, "Electric Shadows" in English, being a reference to the literal translation of the Chinese word for "cinema". At Locarno, Müller's particular expertise helped make the Festival a hub of exciting new cinema from the People's Republic.

Nearly as many Chinese films played at Locarno during his tenure as had in the entire period beforehand, from the first edition in 1946 up until 1991. In 1998, Yue Lü's directorial debut *Mr. Zhao* (*Zhao xiansheng*) received the Pardo d'Oro – the first Chinese film to do so; in 1999, Zhang Yuan's *Crazy English* (*Fengkuang yingyu*) was the first from the nation to be screened on the Piazza Grande – with this auspicious premiere bringing international recognition to Zhang, and establishing him as one of the nation's most promising filmmakers. If Chinese cinema maintains an important place at Locarno today, it should be considered part of Müller's legacy.

In 1992, a few years after the creation of the Hubert Bals Fund in Rotterdam – an initiative dedicated to supporting filmmakers from non-western countries – Müller created *Montecinemaverità*, a foundation with a similar mission. It helped to mount around 100 film productions in developing nations over the course of 12 years. Meanwhile, in 1994, a new section designed in line with the Festival's long-held mission to promote emerging directors was inaugurated: *Cineasti del presente* ("Filmmakers of the Present"), which continues to be a vital strand of the Locarno program.

And yet, the Müller years represented a programming paradox: alongside emerging cinema, Hollywood blockbusters were also making their way onto the Piazza Grande. Two 1994 selections in particular have gone down in cinematic history for their particularly spirited reception: Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* and Jan de Bont's *Speed*. A few years later, even comedies like *There's Something About Mary* (1998) and Disney's *Mulan* (1998) were being invited to Locarno. This "happy schizophrenia", as Müller put it, might have been criticized by cinephiles, but it guaranteed bigger crowds: festival attendance exceeded 100,000 for the first time in the 1990s. Disconcerting as it may have been for the purists, this too was a means by which Locarno was pushing the boundaries of festival programming.

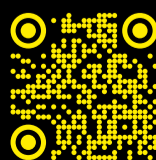


Festival attendees queuing for a screening © Foto ERRE



The Piazza Grande screen being assembled, 1994

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1992-2000

BEGINNINGS

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Albert Serra, 1994



Nobody knows this, but the first time I visited the Locarno Film Festival was in 1994 when I was just 18 years old. One morning, at the beginning of that year's edition, I read in a Spanish newspaper that the Festival was screening *Exotica* by Atom Egoyan – the film had premiered in Cannes a few months earlier – a director whose entire filmography I knew and who interested me. The same day I took a night train from Girona, which left me in Milan the next morning, and from there I took other trains to Locarno. I looked for accommodation on arrival at a hotel of which I vaguely remember the image and the location but not the name, and which I could not find in later years. I went to the screening of the film in the Piazza Grande and by chance, right before it started, I recognized Atom Egoyan by the stairs to the stage, greeted him and introduced myself as an admirer, congratulated him on his films and asked him for an autograph which I have lost but might be able to find. I only stayed one more day because the hotel and everything in Locarno was very expensive and I took the night train back. I arrived in Girona at 6 am on a Sunday. I hitchhiked to my village and I remember being picked up by a very rich businessman in a BMW 7 series car. Many years later, in 2007, Atom Egoyan saw my first film *Honor of the Knights* (*Honor de cavalleria*, 2006) in Paris and liked it very much, and a few years later I had the pleasure of meeting him for the second time. From then on we've kept crossing paths – we even did a masterclass together in Toronto – and I have a lot of affection and respect for him. As fate would have it, my third film, *Story of My Death* (*Història de la meua mort*, 2013), the only fiction film that I did not present at Cannes and was rejected by all sections at that festival – in a longer and unfinished version, it's true – won the Pardo d'Oro in 2013 with Lav Diaz as president of the jury. Of all the films I've made, this one remains, to this day, one of my favorites. At Locarno I had previously presented a couple of other films of mine, *The Lord Worked Wonders in Me* (*El Senyor ha fet en mi meravelles*, 2011) and *The Names of Christ* (*Els noms de Crist*, 2010), and in later years I have come back and had the honor of meeting in person and talking for a long time with Francesco Rosi, John Waters or Pierre Rissient – among many others. But it all started spontaneously in 1994, hence my deep esteem for this festival.

Truong Minh Quy, 2019



The world premiere of *The Tree House* (*Nhà Cây*) at Locarno 2019 was actually the first time I could see my film completed. Due to budget constraints, I couldn't attend the final post-production sessions in person. Ernst Karel, the sound artist, mixed the sound in his studio in the US, while Son Doan, the film's director of photography, and Lionel Devuyt, the colorist, managed the color grade in a lab in Belgium. Although we were exchanging ideas and feedback online throughout the process, the final film remained a mystery for me until the premiere.

Just before the screening began, it started to rain torrentially. The mountains were obscured by a thick curtain of rain. We couldn't wait for it to stop, so we all ran through the downpour to arrive at the cinema in time. Partially soaked, we went on stage and introduced the film. When the lights went out and the first sound and image of the film appeared, I was surprised and deeply moved. Having this film presented at Locarno was very important to me. The film is an experimental documentary essay, and I have to admit it was risky to build it in such a way, as it could be easily misunderstood or overlooked. But Locarno's programming team didn't overlook my film, for which I'm grateful.

In Locarno there are hills and mountains that when shrouded in rain resemble the ones in Vietnam captured in *The Tree House*. After the screening, when we got out of the cinema, it was sunny and warm again.

Bertrand Mandico, 2021



"Locarno, The Sky That Speaks"

I recall the premiere of *After Blue* (*Paradis sale*) in competition at Locarno; I was feverish and the sky was heavy. At the end of the screening, the clouds parted and the applause merged with the rain hammering on the roof of the auditorium. I was wiped out...

As we left the theater, the rain was so heavy that it formed a wall of water before us, as if we were looking out at Niagara Falls. We couldn't leave the cinema, our ark, as the whole town was a torrent. We crossed Locarno in a car that looked like a boat going up a river in a city submerged, something between Conrad and Ballard. Night had fallen with the deluge, the only glimmer in the water-logged darkness the incandescent yellow of the Festival. We took to the roads, up on high, without ever passing the weeping clouds. And that's what made a lasting impression on me: the sky above Locarno that was connected to the hearts of the filmmakers.

■ Bertrand Mandico's *Dragon Dilatation* screens today, 13.8 at 16:30 at Cinema Rialto 1

HOW THE LEOPARD GOT ITS SPOTS

Women – and Politics – to the Front

By Lucia Leoni

For this year's edition of *Pardo*, we invited historians Cyril Cordoba and Lucia Leoni to take us daily on a tour through the Locarno Film Festival's history, chapter by chapter.

The new millennium marked an epochal transition in Locarno's history: the end of Raimondo Rezzonico's presidency (1981-1999) and the start of Marco Solari's (2000-2023). Rezzonico had had a decades-long connection to the Festival – having served as a member of the organizing committee since the early 1950s, and continuously promoting the Festival via his newspaper, *L'Eco di Locarno*. When he handed over the reins to Solari, the *Presidentissimo* was saluted by the Swiss media for having made the Locarno Film Festival one of the two most important cultural events in Switzerland (the other being the Montreux Jazz Festival).

The start of the 21st century marked another important milestone: Roman film critic Irene Bignardi was appointed as the Festival's artistic director, becoming the first woman to hold the position. With a vastly feminized operating team, Bignardi was also the first artistic director to give high-profile positions to women. This change was conveyed visually by the poster for the Festival's 2001 edition, which featured a leopard-print stiletto poised pointily on the cobblestones of the Piazza Grande. However, not all of Bignardi's innovations were well received. With the support of the Swiss Foreign Affairs department, she created a program strand dedicated to films that foregrounded human rights issues, titled (very straightforwardly) "Human Rights Program". In a bold gambit, just a few months after the start of the American war in Afghanistan, she also dedicated a day of the Festival to Afghan cinema, in order to put forward an image of this country that was far more nuanced than the portrayals offered by Western media. Despite the disapproval this program generated at the time from critics such as Frédéric Maire – who chafed against the idea of a politicized Locarno, and axed the program when he became the Festival's artistic director after Bignardi's resignation in 2005 – Bignardi herself later described it as one of her greatest accomplishments.

In retrospect, her tenure can be seen to have been particularly faithful to the Festival's mission as it was originally conceived. Bignardi's predecessors had wanted to include countries that were ostracized by Western powers in the aftermath of World War II, and so create a space of peaceful coexistence in front of the big screen. In Locarno, politics has always gone hand in hand with culture, though some periods have proven more overtly engaged than others. Under Maire, Bignardi's successor, the LFF's positioning was more discreet – even if he took such decisive steps as doing away with the segregation of films shot digitally and those shot on film and, in 2009, organizing a daring retrospective dedicated to Japanese animated cinema, dubbed "Manga Impact". In 2009, after just a few years as artistic director, Maire departed Locarno for the Swiss Film Archive (Cinémathèque Suisse), where he continues to serve as director. But even in this new role, he would help to reinvigorate an old Locarno tradition, restoring the close collaboration between the Festival and the archive. In the decade following Maire's directorial tenure, other Locarno traditions would also make a comeback: glamour and controversy would be the hallmarks of the 2010s.

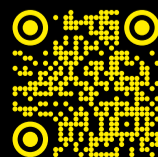


2000 © Film Festival Locarno



2000 © Film Festival Locarno

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2000-2023

BEGINNINGS

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Radu Jude, 2023



"The real history of cinema," Jonas Mekas once wrote, "is invisible history: history of friends getting together." I guess this should be true about everything in the world of cinema – including film festivals. Yes, there were many films, new and old, that I discovered or rediscovered in Locarno (the films of Hong Sangsoo, Teddy Williams, Sylvain George and Abbas Fahdel, just to give some examples), but for me the most important thing is that I have made a lot of friends there, people who have given me inspiration or simply some courage to go on.

Deragh Campbell, 2023



©Conjuring Productions, Insufficient Funds, NSF

Not Expecting too Much from the End of the World

The premiere of Lucy Kerr's *Family Portrait* conflicted with my sibling's wedding in Halifax, Nova Scotia and so I set out to make the second screening the morning after the wedding, flying back from the coast of the Atlantic to Montreal, over to Paris and then Milan before taking the typical train to Locarno. It was an unusual hangover in that I felt doozy and affectionate, cradling myself from flight to flight. Previous to my sibling's wedding, my best friend and I had spent two idyllic weeks in Cape Breton, staying with friends, hiking and swimming in rivers and the ocean. I arrived in Locarno and appeared at the villa where the remaining cast and crew were staying. I hadn't seen most of them since we'd all been together in Hill Country in Texas, on the Guadalupe River where we shot the film 10 months earlier. They received me gently and we ate a beautiful meal at the big kitchen table. Afterward, I sat on the balcony with Rob Rice and I expressed my sorrow that I'd missed (not only our premiere but) all of the screenings of Radu Jude's *Do Not Expect too Much from the End of the World*. Rob assured me that I'd missed something that would be truly important to me. Moments later, he got an email from the Festival stating that a screening of the film was added for the next morning. He booked me a ticket and arranged to meet me at the theater when it finished to take a walk and discuss it.

I emerged into the daylight from the cinema and saw Rob and we began walking into town. I gave fitful impressions of the film because I kept laughing at the snatches of enormous mountains and the lake that I'd see between buildings – I'd gone into the film before I'd taken in any of the surroundings. We discussed something about Radu Jude's irreverence and how the clash of materials gave the impression of spontaneous meanings. I was happy to have seen the film there, on new water with my friend. That night at a party we saw a palm tree catch fire out of nowhere.

■ Radu Jude's *Opt ilustre din lumea ideală* and *Sleep #2* screen today, 14.8 at 19:00 at Cinema Rialto 1

HOW THE LEOPARD GOT ITS SPOTS

Crimes, Sexuality, and Morality

By Lucia Leoni

For this year's edition of *Pardo*, we invited historians Cyril Cordoba and Lucia Leoni to take us daily on a tour through the Locarno Film Festival's history, chapter by chapter.

Since 2009, the more "festive" aspects of the Festival have been greatly enhanced, thanks to the efforts of two artistic directors, both film critics. Under Olivier Père (2009-2012), who was formerly in charge of the Directors' Fortnight at Cannes, Locarno would get its first red carpet, bringing an element of glamour to the proceedings. His successor Carlo Chatrian (2013-2018) would champion the development of La Rotonda, a flagship venue at which visitors could mingle. Most importantly, in 2017, the Festival inaugurated the long-awaited PalaCinema, another major edifice located at the heart of the city, comprising three new movie theaters and offices. The completion of the PalaCinema represented the fulfillment of a dream – to have a "cinema palace" in Locarno – as old as the Festival itself.

However, controversy has never been far away. In the last 15 years, certain programming decisions have sparked heated disputes, their core about clashing ideas of what role cinema should play in society. In 2010, Bruce LaBruce's *L.A. Zombie*, a gay pornographic horror film, sent shockwaves through Locarno. The movie was publicly condemned as morally disturbing by the publisher Armando Dadò – an important figure of Ticino's cultural life – who went so far as to call for the Festival Director Père's resignation. Festival President Marco Solari memorably debated the issue with Dadò on regional television.

Conservatives weren't the only ones criticizing the Festival. In 2014, the LFF invited Roman Polanski to present his latest film, *Venus in Fur*, and give a public lecture. With the memory of his arrest at the 2009 Zurich Film Festival – for evading his 1978 sentence for the rape of a 13-year-old girl – still relatively fresh in the cultural imaginary, the Locarno invitation set off a new tide of condemnation, and Polanski bowed out of the event at the last minute. Festival Director Chatrian, committed "to the principle of free and unfettered artistic expression," lamented the filmmaker's decision, while president Solari declared "the spirit of Locarno" to have been "trampled underfoot".

Today, the Festival still has a ways to go in terms of placing marginalized voices in positions of power. Since 2005, the LFF has had only one female director (Lili Hinstin, between 2018 and 2020), while Maja Hoffmann became its first female president just last year, in 2023. Yet diversity and inclusion are now among the guiding principles of Locarno. Next to official sections such as the Cineasti del Presente and the Open Doors Screenings – both of which embody the Festival's mandate to platform emerging cinema – Locarno is also demonstrating its commitment to actively defining "the future of cinema and audiovisual arts". Such is the explicit mandate of the professorship that Locarno runs through the Università della Svizzera italiana, and the implicit mandate of other, relatively new initiatives like the Critics Academy, a workshop for young critics, and BaseCamp, a hub for young artists. Though the Festival's personnel, programming, and projects continue to change and evolve, after almost 80 years, those original values of youth and innovation still guide and distinguish Locarno at the global scale.

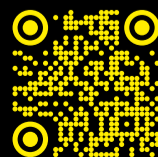


An aerial shot of La Rotonda © Film Festival Locarno



Festival guests at BaseCamp © Film Festival Locarno

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Movie—soon