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Locarno Film Festival: 40 years on

Open-air cinema in the Piazza Grande

In August this year the Locarno Film Festival told its own chequered history with a retrospective of the films shown during the last 40 years. The Festival has grown into a real magnet for the general public; to its greatest credit, it has helped, over and over again, young, unknown film directors to gain wider recognition.

At 8.45 p.m. in the evening of 22nd August 1948, the first international film festival of Locarno opened its show – with «O sole mio» by Giacomo Gentilomo, a film about the Resistance in the occupied Naples of 1943. The modest little programme promised a «Bal au Grand Hotel» after the film show, and, for the following Friday, it suggested an «Excursion to the Maggia Valley» at 2 p.m. after a morning «Special showing in the Rialto». Returning, relaxed and in good spirits, from the excursion, visitors could then go and see the «Evening film» to be shown in the huge garden of the «Grand Hotel».

Instrument for international understanding

In a preface to the programme, the Festival is commended as a peaceful, pleasant, even ideal place for meetings of film lovers and people employed in the film industry. In the first post-war year, the cinema is invoked as a medium for international understanding, which is to play «its great role in the work of peace». The role of the town of Locarno is brought out by a reference to the Locarno Conference of 1925; and the role of art by

the affirmation that only the best films would be shown and that movie trends would be reflected and documented.

The Locarno Film Festival did not just emerge from nowhere; «Film Weeks» had already been held in Lugano, in 1945, but in June 1946 the town's voters turned down a proposal for the building of an open-air theatre which would have ensured the continuation of the Lugano Weeks.

The citizens of Locarno reacted quickly and within two months the Film Festival on Lake Maggiore had been launched. It was hoped that the event would give a fresh impulse to tourism and of course no one wanted it to be lost to German-Switzerland.

Undreamed of boom

The first open-air screen set up was of modest proportions; the one that has stood in the Piazza Grande since 1971 is among the largest in the world. In the last few years the 5,000 or so spectators have seen such film successes as «Paris, Texas» by Wim Wenders or «Vivement dimanche!» by François Truffaut. And still some 1,500 to 2,000 people follow, until all hours of the night,

The huge screen in the Piazza Grande where up to 5,000 spectators can be seated (photo: Diego Rossi).

cine enthusiasts' works such as «L'argent» by Robert Bresson, «Klassenverhältnisse» by Jean-Marie Straub or «Toute une Nuit» by Chantal Akermann. The Piazza showings are the *chefs-d'œuvre* of this, the most important Swiss filmic event. They turn the open-air cinema into a happening that carries conviction – and not only with the specialists. The huge upswing that the Festival has seen during the last few years – over 81,000 visitors were counted in 1987 – is primarily thanks to Festival Director David Streiff's programme formula, applied since 1983. What is shown in the Piazza are, principally, successful films of well-known directors, with first-run performances in Switzerland. This meets the taste of a wider public. The competition films are all shown under the same conditions in the Morettina schoolhouse. Retrospectives, national weeks, and (since 1983) the TV Movies section are clearly demarcated as special areas and thus find their interested public.

The cold war

Locarno between the interests of the film industry, of the *cinéastes* and of the tourism promoters: this field of tension has stamped the face of the Festival since its period of rapid expansion in its later years. Discussions about this, in the years from 1968 to 1970, when it was decided to put the Festival forward to the autumn of each year – a season when there were always fewer tourists – even took dramatic form. In 1966, Sandro Bianconi and Freddy Buache (who had previously been responsible for the retrospectives devoted to a historical consciousness, organised since 1957), took over the programming of the Festival. They came as successors to the retired critic Vinicio Beretta who clearly discharged the functions of his post with great ability and who, as a keen observer and devotee of the cinema, decisively moulded the face of the Festival. Beretta opened up the competition previously limited to first works only, to second and third «films of new film makers and young film nations». At the time of the cold war, however, Beretta came under pressure. The Festival, an event at which works from the Eastern Bloc of course had their place, was accused of leftist leanings. As a consequence of such reproaches, Locarno was even denied American films in 1962.

The Bianconi-Buache directorship fell, at the time of the events of 1968. In May of that year the showy Festival of Cannes, which opened with «Gone with the Wind», was broken off at the instigation of film makers such as François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard and Alain Resnais. And in Locarno, too, the waves appear to have been running high at that time: although the French magazine «L'Express» could still report, in 1961, that Locarno had been the best festival of the year, that the event had surpassed those of Berlin and Cannes, and had even threatened the Venice Festival, on 10th October 1970 the film critic and festival-reporter of the «NZZ» noted that «the Festival of Locarno is in fact no longer a festival at all. If one would want to look for a description of the event, the first definition that springs to mind is a flashily-organized week of a film club. There is no longer a public in Locarno – apart from the public of pupils and students, whose visits are organized».

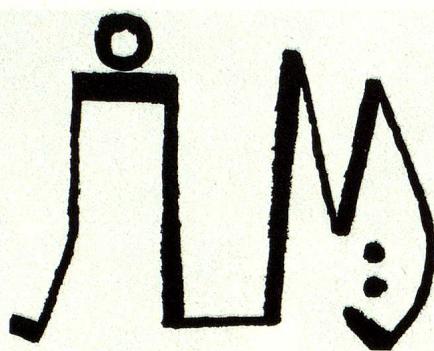
The «Tages-Anzeiger» newspaper reported on performances interrupted by whistles and catcalls and on visitors who «in principle sat only on the left in the cinema». In the «NZZ», even the cancellation of the Federal subsidy for the Festival was mooted, and this prompted a vehement but by no means unpoetic retort in the «Tages-Anzeiger».

The Seventh Estate was trapped in the maze of ideological quarrels; morale in Locarno sank to zero; and commentators worried about the continued existence of the Festival. Freddy Buache and Sandro Bianconi stepped down because of (as they put it) a lack of moral and financial support on the part of the authorities, and because of the shortcomings of the organizational infrastructure. In the years to follow, the Festival was directed by Moritz de Hadeln, later by Jean-Pierre Brossard.

History in retrospective

The filmic history of the Festival – directors of fame and brilliance returned again and again – was part of the programme this year: forty films which, themselves, were events in Locarno, document the Festival in a retrospective of its own story. This series, which includes the first work of Stanley Kubrick, Claude Chabrol, Sidney Lumet, Karel Reisz, Milos Forman, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Paul Ruiz, Michel Soutter and many others, illustrates one of the main objectives of the Festival – the discovery of young, unknown talents.

Peter Schneider (extracts from the «Tages-Anzeiger» newspaper).



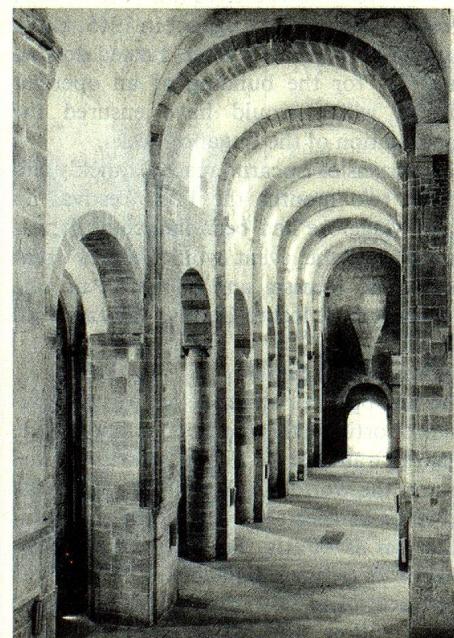
Berne: Paul Klee

The Berne Kunstmuseum is the only venue in Europe to show the large Paul Klee retrospective conceived by the Museum of Modern Art, New York. The concern of the huge panoramic show is to display, in a single vivid presentation, Klee's wealth of substance and expression by selected examples from the complete works, which, for the most part, do not come from the two large Berne collections. Besides the comprehensive catalogue, which is based on the latest findings of Klee research, the first critical, complete edition of the Klee diaries has just come out. In the picture: «Als ich den Esel ritt» (As I rode the donkey, 1940).

The show runs until 3 January.

Payerne: church restored

The restoration work on the Romanesque abbey church in Payerne was completed this year. This is now one of the best-preserved Cluniac buildings. The work was started in 1926 after the church had previously served for very many years as a barn, barracks, prison, storehouse and turnhalle.



Telegrams

- Bright spot in the Ticino museum landscape: Lugano celebrates its newly-created «Museo Cantonale d'Arte».
- The enlarged natural history and art museum in St Gallen has been reopened.
- Exhibitions
 - Züspel exhibition halls, Zurich: *Antic 88* Antiques Fair (25 April to 3 May).
 - Kunstmuseum, Basle: *Masters of Cubism*, drawings and watercolours (until 31 January).
 - Musée Rath, Geneva: «*Minotaurs*»; The Adventure of Albert Skira (until 11 Jan.).
 - Musée d'Art et d'Histoire, Fribourg: *Alfred Hofkunst* (7 Feb. to 13 Mar.).
 - Musée Cantonal des Beaux-Arts, Lausanne: «*Woman and Surrealism*» (until 28 Feb.).

Clothes make culture

Swiss artists, St Gallen embroiderers and fashion designers of SAFT (Syndicate for Avant-garde Fashion Trends), an organiz-



ation of young Swiss fashion creators, have mounted an out-of-the-ordinary exhibition devoted to the border area between fashion, fabrics and art, in the town hall of Yverdon-les-Bains. Incidentally, the show will appear as guest of the Swiss Cultural Centre in Paris next year. Picture: «Le Boléro des Tripes» (Bolero of Velveteen) by Daniel Spoerri (photo: Pierre Michel).

Computer creates Monroe

For the first time in film history, a film with fully-synthetic actors has been produced, in Montreal. The creator of this six-minute production, whose subject matter is a meeting between Marilyn Monroe and Humphrey Bogart, is the Swiss married couple, Nadia Mangenat-Thalman and Daniel Thalman, both researchers living in Canada. They have developed a software «human factory» which, starting out from a bust of the person to be portrayed, can bring deceptively real figures to «life».