

## Between Politics and Economics: The Locarno Film Festival from Tourism to Cinephilia (1946–1972)

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### Abstract

Renowned today as an international hub for emerging cinema, the Locarno Film Festival (LFF) was initially founded in 1946 as a touristic attraction managed by film professionals. This article examines the LFF's struggles to impose its cultural and artistic ambitions over the economic agenda of its main stakeholders and against the country's strong anticommunist climate from the 1940s to the 1970s. Underlining the difficulties met by this event situated in the peripheral canton of Ticino, it sheds light on the progressive involvement of the federal state as a mediator in the conflicts between the film and the tourism industries on the one side, and the so-called cinephiles circles on the other.

**Keywords:** Festival; Politics; Cinephilia; Switzerland; Anticommunism.

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Founded in 1946, the Locarno Film Festival (LFF) is one of the oldest film festivals in the world. Renowned as an international hub for emerging cinema, the Swiss event has often been portrayed as an alternative “to traditional commercial distribution” driven by cinephile ambitions (Kishore 2013: 738), notably because it pioneered the celebration of Italian Neo-Realism, Latin American and Asian Cinema, and especially Polish, Czech, and Hungarian New Waves. In fact, originally conceived as a touristic attraction managed by film professionals, Locarno had to fight hard to impose its cultural ambitions over the economic agenda of its main stakeholders and against an anticommunism widely shared among “the political, military, and judicial authorities [as well as] the vast majority of parties, associations and newspapers” (Fayet 2009). During its first twenty-five years, the LFF was thus caught between economics and politics and developed its identity through thick and thin.

If no film festival was ever created with purely artistic motivations (Taillibert and Wäfler 2016),<sup>1</sup> unlike other events founded during the same period, such as Venice (1932), Cannes (1939), Karlovy Vary (1946), or Berlin (1951), the LFF was not established nor initially supported by political authorities: it rather emerged, like the Edinburgh festival (1947), as a “grassroots celebration” (Stevens 2016). From the point of view of German-speaking Switzerland, where the political decisions were made and where most of the cultural and economic life was concentrated (especially in the field of cinema), the fact that the country’s main film festival was held in the peripheral and culturally minority canton of Ticino was the source of many conflicts.<sup>2</sup> That is why, contrarily to other competitions which gained legitimacy by emancipating from the control of the state, Locarno escaped from the grip of the tourism and the film industries precisely by obtaining the support of the government (Haver and Jacques 2003, Moeschler 2011).<sup>3</sup>

Considering film festivals as “mixed spaces crossed by commercial interest, specialized film knowledge and tourist trajectories” (Harbord 2002:60), we will analyze how the tensions between different stakeholders – particularly associations of film producers, distributors, and cinema operators as well as a tourist organization called Pro Locarno – affected the development of the LFF’s identity. To do so, this article will retrace the period during which the festival evolved from a small-scale, provincial celebration to an international platform for art house cinema. As we will argue, the economic tutelage and political pressures of the tourism and the film industries, as well as the uncertain support from the Confederation, had a determining influence on the shaping of the festival during its first twenty-five years.

## State of the Art and Research Outline

Apart from some chapters in edited volumes on the history of festivals (Autissier 2009, Giorgi et al. 2011, Poirrier 2012, Fléchet et al. 2013), extensive works entirely devoted to film festivals by historians are still rare, especially if we consider the number of books written or edited by film scholars (Porton 2009, Wong 2011, Dickson 2014, Diesto-Dópido 2014, Valck et al. 2016, Vallejo and Paz Peirano 2017, Jenkins 2018), as well as critics, journalists, or festival curators (Turan 2002, Torche 2008, Lloyd 2011). Noting that, comparatively, historical works often focus on geopolitical, diplomatic, and ideological issues (Pisu 2013, Kötzing and Moine 2017, Moine 2018, Fehrenbach 2020, Bláhová 2020), this article will not only shed light on the political history of the LFF, but it will also underline the economic factors which played a key role in its identity building. We will consider that film festivals, situated “at the intersection of art, commerce, technology, culture, identity, power, politics and ideology” (Rüling and Strandgaard Pedersen 2010: 319), are not independent and autonomous entities created solely for art’s sake, but that they depend on various actors defending their own interests (Getz et al. 2007, Rhyne 2009, Getz and Andersson 2010). We will thus examine how diverse agendas

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1. Among the few events mainly supported by local cinephiles after the Second World War were the Sydney Film Festival (1954) and the San Francisco Film Festival (1957).
  2. As *Variety*’s film critic Gene Moskowitz explained, the LFF, “situated in the South is far from the Northern Swiss who dominates. [...] It also appears that many would like to have the festival take place in German speaking Switzerland”. Gene Moskowitz, “Locarno Fest Still Ignored by U.S.”, *Variety* 08.08.1962: 16. It is worthy of note that *Cinémathèque suisse* was situated in French-speaking Switzerland.
  3. The first federal law on cinema in Switzerland came into effect in 1963. Before that, the Confederation had no legal basis to support the festival.

shaped the construction of one of the first major European film festivals created after the Second World War, to begin to fill an historiographical gap about the LFF.

Despite a growing interest for the dynamic field of film festival studies since the publication of Marijke de Valck's *Film festivals* (2007) and the *Film Festival Yearbooks* edited by Dina Iordanova (2009–present), only a couple academic publications have been dedicated to the Locarno Film Festival (Casetti and Richeri 2004, Maggi 2005). Next to the (sometimes critical) commemorative volumes edited by the festival itself (Volonterio 1977, Schlappner et al. 1987, Cosandey 1988, Maire and Pesko 1997, Buccella 2014, LFF 2022, Buccella 2022), as well as several accounts from art historians (Volonterio 1997, Ambrosioni 1998, Lucchini and Catella 2004), only an article (Wäfler 2017) and a M.A. dissertation (Leoni 2020) proposed examinations of the economic and political issues of Locarno's history, going further than simply emphasizing which filmmakers or cinematographic movements were “discovered” in Locarno.

In order to propose a contextual analysis of the LFF, this article will rely on the archives of the festival and the touristic organization Pro Locarno held by the *Archivio di Stato* in Bellinzona, as well as those of the professional film associations deposited at the *Cinémathèque suisse* (Swiss Film Archive) in Penthaz.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, documents from the federal administration, situated at the Swiss Federal Archives in Bern and from the national and international press (general and specialized) will be exploited. In the following pages, we will firstly focus on the initial years of the festival (1946–1949), when it was completely under the tutelage of the tourism and the film industries. Secondly, we will examine the ideological obstacles that hindered the event's cultural ambitions in the early 1950s. Thirdly, we will analyze how political and economic pressures grew as the LFF specialized in emerging cinema in the 1960s. Finally, we will demonstrate how Locarno's radical choices to become a hub for “new cinema” in the late 1960s clashed with the agenda of its main stakeholders.

## 1 Getting Rid of a Commercial Tutelage

Founded in a small seaside resort situated south of the Alps, the Locarno Film Festival was conceived as a tourist attraction by its founders (members of the tourist office Pro Locarno and professionals from the movie industry). In addition to the cocktail parties, receptions, beauty contests, and fashion shows, excursions to the surrounding valleys and to the islands on Lake Maggiore were integral parts of the festival. With its Mediterranean climate and romantic scenery set in the park of a 19<sup>th</sup> century palace (the Grand Hotel), Locarno shared many characteristics with others film festivals created during the same period on rivieras or in spa towns and did not stand particularly out as a “cinophilic” event.

Until the mid-1950s, only movies that were commercially distributed in Switzerland could be screened in Locarno.<sup>5</sup> The festival heavily relied on the professional networks of vice-president André Mondini (owner of the town's cinemas). In fact, the film industry exerted such an important influence on the festival, that the press designed it as a “film market” that needed to “emancipate itself from the movie distributors.”<sup>6</sup> From an artistic point of view, Locarno did not initially have a very good reputation, and many film critics accused this “trade show” of lacking “a sense of culture” and a real vision of cinema.<sup>7</sup>

Just as Cannes (Benghozi and Nénert 1995), in its early days, Locarno was deemed too touristic, too “commercial,”<sup>8</sup> and not enough “cinophile” by those who regretted that “the state joyously ignore[d]” it and did not help it adopting a more cultural agenda.<sup>9</sup> The LFF was generally depicted as being under the “tutelage” of

4. Contacted by email, the International Federation of Film Producers Associations (FIAPF) declined the author's request to access its archives.

5. Only a small fraction of the movies was proposed to the festival by foreign embassies in Bern.

6. AV, “Billet du Tessin”, *La Liberté* (07.08.1950): 4; Jean Thévenot, “Locarno a inauguré la saison des festivals”, *L'Ecran français* 159 (1948): 4.

7. Jean-Charles Tacchella and Jean Thévenot, “Locarno a inauguré la saison des festivals”, *L'Ecran français*, no. 159, 13.07.1948: 4; Virgilio Gilardoni, “Il terzo Festival internazionale del Film”, *Il Lavoratore*, 10.07.1948: 2.

8. ASCT, 3.1.15, C6: memo by the festival for Federal Councilor Philipp Etter, 23.08.1955.

9. Jean Nicollier, “Les débuts du VII<sup>me</sup> festival de Locarno”, *Gazette de Lausanne* (07.07.1953): 1.

the movie and the tourism industries by film buffs,<sup>10</sup> who noted that the most interesting part of the program (*films d'auteur*, documentaries and special sections such as the retrospective) were scheduled in the morning and the afternoon in local cinemas (when the locals were working and the tourists sightseeing) while the most commercial movies were screened in the park of the Grand Hotel in the evening, as pure entertainment products.

This situation was mainly due to the fact that Pro Locarno organized the first editions of the festival “alone and without any financial help from the local authorities.”<sup>11</sup> Consequently, in 1949, in order to diversify its funding sources and hopefully gain more independence in the artistic field, the festival became an association of its own, legally separated from the tourist office.<sup>12</sup> However, after this first step towards autonomy, the LFF met several difficulties in the early 1950s, mostly caused by conflicts with the film industry, which necessitated the progressive involvement of the federal state as a mediator.

The first of these incidents was the cancellation of the 1951 edition, caused by a lack of funding to restore one of the three movie theaters of Locarno. The renovation was demanded by film distributors, who required better screening conditions for their products.<sup>13</sup> The absence of political support to overcome this obstacle was duly noted by the omnipotent International Federation of Film Producers Associations (FIAPF), the “king-maker of the international film festival circuit” (Ostrowska 2020, Moine 2013),<sup>14</sup> which controlled (and limited) the number of film festivals with its four categories ranking: A (competitive international film festivals), B (non-competitive international film festivals), C (competitive specialized film festivals) and D (non-competitive national film festivals).

After the introduction of this classification in the early 1950s, the members of the FIAPF were instructed to boycott the festivals which did not follow the federation’s regulations, thus depriving them of their most crucial assets (the movies). One of the requirements to join Venice and Cannes in the A-list was for festivals to send invitations to film-producing countries via diplomatic channels. For the LFF, this would have meant a liberation from the tutelage of the distributors and the possibility of establishing a program based on more artistic considerations. Unfortunately for Locarno, the Swiss government refused to do so, in order not to give the festival some sort of officiality.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, one year after being ranked B (like the newly founded Berlinale), the LFF was downgraded to the D rank in 1953.

This setback, a loss of prestige for Switzerland, triggered a reaction from Bern. The government, which still refused to financially support the festival, to transmit invitations via diplomatic channels, or to plead its cause to the FIAPF because it was an institution “of private nature,”<sup>16</sup> recognized Locarno as an event of national significance in 1954.<sup>17</sup> This meant that Swiss distributors could then import movies out of their annual quota specifically for the festival.<sup>18</sup> In other words, from then on, the LFF’s program would no longer be composed solely of commercially distributed films selected according to profitability criteria. This decisive step allowed the organizers to stop relying mainly on major producing countries such as the United States, France, Italy,

10. ASCT, 3.1.15, C6: letter from Bolla to Calgari, 14.05.1954.

11. ASCT, 2.2.80, box 45: minutes of the general assembly of the executive committee of the festival, 11.01.1949.

12. Comparatively, Cannes was formally created as an independent association a couple of years earlier, while the Berlin film festival only did so in 1969. Besides the city of Locarno, the surrounding villages, and the canton of Ticino, other financial support to the LFF came from the hoteliers, transport societies, casinos, banks, etc.

13. ASCT, 3.1.15, C6: letter from the festival to the Association of film distributors in Switzerland, 12.04.1950.

14. Founded in 1933 and revived in 1948, the FIAPF promoted the free international circulation of movies, especially after the arrival of the Motion Picture Association of America as a member. Film festivals were initially seen as a good tool for this purpose, but as they proliferated, the federation established a categorization system in 1951 to restrict the events that could hold previews and competitions via a certification system.

15. ASCT, 3.1.15, C6: letter from the Federal Political Department to the Department of Education of Ticino, 08.02.1951.

16. ASCT, 3.1.15, V4: letter from the FDHA to Locarno, 12.11.1954.

17. AFS, E2001E#1970/1#1112\*: Federal Council’s decision, 01.06.1954.

18. Since 1938, the import of feature films in Switzerland was subjected to a quota aimed at limiting the monopoly of big foreign companies (mainly American) and the diffusion of propaganda from Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and the USSR. It was suppressed in 1992 (Haver 2004). ASCT, 3.1.15, V4: letter from the Swiss Associations for the Development of cinematographic culture to the festival, 30.12.1954.

Great Britain, and Germany,<sup>19</sup> and to open up to other national cinematographies, especially those of Eastern Europe, which were experiencing a period of thaw and renewal.<sup>20</sup> In the words of English and French film critics, in the early 1950s, because “there was no question of asking the Federal Government for help [...] the Locarno Festival has developed a style of its own” by “calling directly on the countries of the Iron Curtain.”<sup>21</sup>

## 2 Facing Ideological Obstacles

Until the nomination of Vinicio Beretta as the festival's secretary in 1953, movies from socialist countries were rare in Locarno. This journalist developed relationships with Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, the USSR, and East Germany, which were particularly enthused by the opportunity to take part in a Western film festival. This earned the LFF the reputation of being “the most open, the freest, the most eclectic” cinematographic competition, and to appear as a *détente avant la lettre* event where both blocs coexisted in the same program.<sup>22</sup> From 1953 on, at least one East European movie was awarded each year in Locarno (except in 1957), a situation which displeased many Swiss German commentators, especially in 1955, when films coming from the other side of the Iron Curtain received more prizes than the Western ones. As for the Federal Political Department (i.e. Foreign Affairs), which still refused to collaborate with the LFF, it asked Locarno to take into account “certain political considerations” in the selection of movies.<sup>23</sup>

In 1956, a hard blow illustrated the timid but growing will of the state to support the festival. The incident started as a commercial dispute between Swiss distributors and foreign producers.<sup>24</sup> When the latter considered that no satisfactory agreement could be found, the FIAPF sided with its members and decided not to recognize Locarno as a retaliatory measure, which led the festival to be cancelled for a second time. The federation's decision greatly surprised the Swiss authorities, which denounced a confusion between a private matter and a public national event.<sup>25</sup> Still, Bern failed to support the festival against violent attacks from the film industry concerning the selection in Locarno of movies coming from socialist countries or, as the festival put it, “films produced by countries that are not, for reasons unknown to us, at Cannes or Venice.”<sup>26</sup>

While cinephiles praised Locarno's decision to screen those films, generally absent from most traditional cinemas theaters, many Swiss Germans commentators perceived it as an ideological threat.<sup>27</sup> After the repression of the 1956 Budapest insurrection, strong anticommunist reactions throughout the country led the Swiss association of cinema operators to call for a boycott of movies from the Eastern bloc and to leave Locarno's patronage committee.<sup>28</sup> Considering any East European production as worthless communist propaganda, the Swiss German press was particularly annoyed by the fact that, as for all participants, the anthem of socialist countries was played before the screenings of their films in the park of the Grand Hotel, and that their flag was raised during this ceremony. A member of the Federal Assembly even reproached the government having officially recognized the LFF, which he depicted as a mere showcase of communist propaganda. Those

19. Between 1946 and 1950, American, Italian, French, British and West German films represented 81% of the festival's main program. This share reduced to 66% between 1952–1957, 52% between 1958 and 1962 and 36% between 1963 and 1965.

20. After the death of Stalin and the questioning of the canons of socialist realism, Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Bulgaria welcomed a new generation of filmmakers whose works were awarded in several festivals around the world.

21. Francis Koval, “Locarno Festival”, *Sight and Sound* 19:7 (November 1950): 272; Pierre Michaut, “À Berlin et à Locarno: quelques films”, *Les Cahiers du cinéma* 38 (1954): 33.

22. Pierre Michaut, “De Berlin à Locarno”, *Les Cahiers du cinéma* 51 (1955): 30. See also Guido Aristarco's articles in *Cinema nuovo* no. 15 (15.07.1953), no. 16 (01.08.1953) et no. 40 (01.08.1954).

23. ASCT, 3.1.15, C5: letter from the festival to the FIAPF, 30.03.1956.

24. Foreign producers boycotted Swiss distributors to pressure them to abandon their mutual agreement to pay less for imported films.

25. ASCT, 3.1.15, C5: letter from the Swiss Film Chamber to the FIAPF, 03.05.1956.

26. ASCT, 3.1.15, C6: letter from the festival to the FIAPF, 11.07.1955.

27. Because any form of cultural exchange with the Eastern bloc was seen in Switzerland as a strategy to keep the population's vigilance at bay and because pacifist rhetoric was automatically equated with communist propaganda, Locarno was accused of playing into the hands of peaceful coexistence (Buomberger 2017, Bulcin 2019).

28. “Keine kommunistischen Filme in der Schweiz”, *Schweizer Film Suisse* 11 (1956): 5.

accusations led the Swiss intelligence services to closely monitor the festival,<sup>29</sup> and the Swiss authorities to suggest Locarno to select less movies from the Eastern bloc.<sup>30</sup>

Nevertheless, the cancellation of the 1956 edition triggered a positive reaction from the Swiss government. In 1957, the Federal Department of Home Affairs (FDHA) finally dared writing to the FIAPF, to ask the federation not to do anything detrimental to the festival.<sup>31</sup> Two years later, the LFF finally accessed the A-rank, after having been forced to change its dates to late July, during the peak of the tourist season. Fortunately for the LFF, the tourism industry was still very keen on supporting it and represented one of the main driving forces behind the festival's survival. Given the economic importance of the event for the region, Pro Locarno worst fear was indeed that another town could "steal" it after a cancelled edition.<sup>32</sup> In fact, in the 1950s, because a great part of the management board of the festival was still composed of people representing the interests of the tourist office, which provided one third of its subsidies, Pro Locarno had no qualms asking:

"Who wanted the festival? Pro Locarno. Who made huge sacrifices to create it and make it a very effective means of propaganda for Locarno? Pro Locarno. Who still organizes the festival today? Pro Locarno. From whom does the main financial contribution to the event come after that of the [canton]? Pro Locarno. Who owns the material that the festival uses? Pro Locarno. Does Pro Locarno really have the voice it deserves on the festival's boards?"<sup>33</sup>

Still subjected to the goodwill of the film and the tourism industries, the festival was in an increasingly difficult position, caught between the cultural and artistic ambitions of leading figures such as Vinicio Beretta, and the conservative views of distributors, cinema operators, and "the local bourgeoisie" ensuring its economic survival (Schlappner 1987: 45).

If, on the one hand, the festival began organizing highly acclaimed retrospectives in collaboration with the *Cinémathèque suisse*,<sup>34</sup> on the other hand, it proved difficult "to silence the criticism that the Locarno festival ha[d] no other purpose than to offer the tourists a form of entertainment out of the ordinary."<sup>35</sup> Additionally, Locarno's open door to the Polish, Czech, and Hungarian New Waves, which the organizers considered natural for an international meeting point situated in a neutral country, beyond political divides, was very badly received in anticommunist Switzerland.<sup>36</sup> This uncomfortable situation worsened in the early 1960s, despite the nomination a new president (Enrico Franzoni, mayor of the town of Muralto since 1952 and national councilor since 1959) chosen in the hope that he could defend and support the LFF in Bern.

### 3 The Conjunction of Political and Economic Pressures

If Franzoni became a key supporter of the festival at the national level, at the international one, Oscar Düby (FIAPF's general secretary since 1959 and head of the FDHA's Film Section from 1963 to 1969) occupied a strategic position that undoubtedly benefitted Locarno amidst growing competition between film festivals. The Swiss functioned as a mediator who defended the LFF's choice to specialize in "new cinema" (i.e. first and second movies of young filmmakers) when it decided, one year before Cannes introduced its *Semaine de la critique*, to be divided in two: a competitive section (for experimental movies and avant-garde cinema

29. AFS, E4329.01C#1996/203\*: surveillance files of the LFF, 1957–88.

30. Consequently, the LFF apologized for having selected too much movies "that did not correspond to the spirit, the spiritual need, and the Swiss conceptions". ASCT, 3.1.15, C6: memo by the festival for Etter, 23.08.1955.

31. ASCT, 3.1.15, V4: letter from the Film Section of the FDHA to the FIAPF, 23.03.1957.

32. ASCT, 2.2.80, box 47: report by the organizational committee of the festival, 01.1953.

33. ASCT, 3.1.15., C5: internal document of the festival, 1956.

34. The first retrospectives were for example dedicated to Akira Kurosawa (1957), Ingmar Bergman (1959), Luis Bunuel (1960), Fritz Lang (1961), Jean Vigo (1962) or John Ford (1963).

35. ASCT, 3.1.15, C5: letter from the festival to the FIAPF, 30.03.1956.

36. In 1959, the president of the festival declared: "If the authorities were to officially or unofficially recommend that no films from Eastern European countries should be shown at the Festival, the Committee would abide by this wish, although, in the minds of the organizers, the international character of the Festival should not completely exclude productions from beyond the Iron Curtain". Cin, ACSR (CSL2), F10: minutes of the meeting between the festival, the Swiss Film Chamber and professional associations, 10.04.1959.



in the afternoon) and a non-competitive section (with more conventional or “classic” movies in the evening). This solution pleased both the film and the tourism industries, as well as the cinephiles, who recognized that Locarno had become “more than a simple tourist attraction [thanks to] the independence that preside[d] over the choice of the films presented.”<sup>37</sup>

If Düby’s support certainly weighed in the FIAPF’s decision to rank Locarno in the A category in 1959, the decisive impulse to the internationalization, the professionalization, and the transformation of the festival into a meeting point for cinephiles with an artistic taste for avant-garde cinema came from Vinicio Beretta, who became the festival’s director in 1960. Under his leadership, the LFF was increasingly praised by film critics,<sup>38</sup> who appreciated his daring choice to promote young filmmakers instead of “society events, stardom or starlet shows.”<sup>39</sup> However, Beretta also received warnings from the film industry and the Swiss authorities, who asked him “to be very careful in the choice of subjects,”<sup>40</sup> to exclude films “that seem politically dangerous”, and to select only four or five East European films for each edition.<sup>41</sup>

In 1960, political pressure was exerted on the international jury, which was dissuaded from awarding the Golden Veil (the highest prize) to the Soviet movie *Foma Gordeyev*.<sup>42</sup> This was apparently not enough to calm things down, since “in protest against the accumulation of awards for Eastern films and filmmakers, several theater owners and distributors walked out and did not attend the closing reception.”<sup>43</sup> At the end of that edition, the organizers, worried that they would have upset the government, asked the FDHA’s Film Section if they had acted with sufficient parsimony towards socialist countries.<sup>44</sup>

Having gained cultural legitimacy with the creation of special programs such as *Cinema e Gioventù* (Cinema and Youth), supported by the cantonal Department of Education, Locarno finally received an organizational and financial support from the Swiss government in the early 1960s. The Confederation accepted to transmit official invitations to foreign countries via diplomatic channels in 1961. More importantly, thanks to the coming into effect of the first law on cinema in Switzerland, the government attributed Locarno a first federal subsidy in 1963. But when the festival definitively decided to specialize in “new cinema”, renewed tensions with the film and the tourism industries arose.

Locarno’s affirming identity was partly a product of the collaboration between Beretta and Freddy Buache, director of the *Cinemathèque suisse*. In addition to organizing retrospectives that were unanimously acclaimed (even by Swiss German journalists), their friendship facilitated the selection in Locarno of films that Buache had seen in Karlovy Vary, Moscow, Prague, or Budapest.<sup>45</sup> Because of the low commercial potential of the movies coming from the other side of the Iron Curtain and because of its strong anticommunism, the Swiss film industry showed a deep disinterest for them (Buache 2009: 177). Joining their voice to that of Pro Locarno, which was worried that these films would scare away the tourists coming to Ticino for entertainment,<sup>46</sup> cinema operators threatened to create their own international film festival in Zurich, the country’s economic capital

37. Gene Moskowitz, “Locarno”, *Cinéma*, no. 60, 1961: 50.

38. Freddy Landry, “Locarno inaugure aujourd’hui son XIIeme Festival international du film”, *Feuille d’Avis de Neuchâtel*, 09.07.1959 : 1 and 9.

39. ASCT, 3.1.15, MF12: letter from Buache to the newspaper *Le Peuple*, 08.08.1960.

40. Cin, SLV (CSL12): minutes of the Swiss Film Chamber, 07.06.1960.

41. ASCT, 3.1.15, V7: letter from Beretta to the FDHA’s Film Section, 10.06.1960.

42. This situation was the consequence of protests from the Swiss German press after the screening of a Cuban short film in Locarno. According to one film critic: “Swiss German circles began to accuse the Locarno festival of ‘selling out to the East’ and threatened to launch a vigorous press campaign against it if... This the jury knew and - freely - took into account”. “Que faut-il penser du palmarès du XIIIeme Festival de Locarno ?”, *L’Express* (12.08.1960): 10. This testimony is similar to that of Buache (2009: 130).

43. Jürg Bär, “Locarno: Goldenes Segel an Italien”, *Film Echo* 62 (03.08.1960): 1011.

44. ASCT, 3.1.15, V7: letter from Beretta to the FDHA’s Film Section, 10.08.1960.

45. As director Shirley Clarke explained to a French journalist, “the great interest of Locarno compared to other international festivals was that it was the only one where the organizers chose the films presented without the producer countries being able to impose their choice”. Isabelle Vichniac, “Le Japon triomphe au Festival cinématographique international de Locarno”, *Le Monde*, (01.08.1961).

46. ASCT, 3.1.15, C4: minutes of the executive commission of the festival, 23.12.1961.

city.<sup>47</sup> The antagonism between commercial and cultural interests, more flagrant than ever, then fueled violent political attacks against Locarno.

With the support of key figures of the Swiss German press, cinema operators launched a defamatory campaign against the festival and its director, whom they accused of being a cryptocommunist using the festival as a showcase for communist propaganda.<sup>48</sup> Reacting to these polemics, Hans-Peter Tschudi (head of the Home Affairs) suspended the transmission of invitations via diplomatic channels and suggested Locarno to program less “subversive” movies. Faced with persistent criticism, he then proposed a more constructive solution: the creation of a “national” selection commission – supposed to act “in favor of ‘western culture’” – including some of the festival’s most ardent detractors.<sup>49</sup>

Even if Beretta considered that this compromise allowed the film industry to “practically control the festival,”<sup>50</sup> he eventually had to accept it. This political selection commission, which was perceived as a retaliatory and intrusive measure from German speaking Switzerland in Locarno despite the government’s insurance that its aim was not to create a “state festival [with] an official federal organization,”<sup>51</sup> was fiercely criticized by the international press. More importantly, despite this rapprochement between the festival and the film industry, Locarno continued to be attacked for selecting and awarding too many East European movies in the following years. Also criticized for having given in to pressures from German speaking Switzerland, Beretta left the festival for good in early 1966.

#### 4 An Impossible Breakaway between Economy and Culture?

Despite having gained the support of the state and the recognition of the cinephiles in the late 1950s and the early 1960s, the LFF still had to struggle to affirm its identity. In the late 1960s, the festival decided to assert its ambitions more drastically. Breaking from the tradition by putting an end to the open-air screenings in the park of the Grand Hotel, Sandro Bianconi (scholar, movie critic, and leader of the local film club) and Freddy Buache – the two new directors of the LFF – changed the dates of the event from summer to autumn (a decision appealing to apprentices, high school, and university students). This radical shift unsurprisingly displeased the tourist office Pro Locarno, which accused the directors of organizing a festival for film critics only.<sup>52</sup> As for the Swiss film distributors and cinema operators, they called Locarno an “anti-economic” ghetto and an “anti-festival,”<sup>53</sup> whose “elitism” they considered contradictory with the financial support provided by the Confederation.<sup>54</sup> The tourism and the film industries thus asked Bianconi and Buache to put things back on an even keel by selecting movies that could attract wider audiences.<sup>55</sup>

The FIAPF, noting “a significant drop in interest” in film festivals in general, prevented Locarno from specializing in Third World cinema because another event was already considering this option. As for Düby, who also explained that another festival (most likely Pesaro) was about to “become, with substantial financial resources,

47. Interestingly, the Zurich Film Festival created in 2005 has also been described as a competitor for Locarno (Valck et al.: 49–64).

48. Beretta was deeply affected by this campaign, which he designed as a “manhunt”. Also attacked for being of Italian origin, he constantly had to repeat that he was not a communist but only a member of the Social Democratic Party. ASCT, 3.1.15, V7: letter from Beretta to Tschudi, 16.12.1961.

49. For more about this commission, see Cyril Cordoba, “The Locarno Film Festival under the Influence? Programming Eastern European Movies in Anti-communist Switzerland (1946–1962)”, in *Contemporary European History*, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777322000650>. ASCT, 3.1.15, C4: minutes of the executive commission of the festival, 23.12.1961.

50. ASCT, 3.1.15, V7, letter from Beretta to Freddy Landry, 27.09.1961.

51. It is notable that in 1961 and 1962, the head of the FDHA’s Film Section repeatedly expressed his desire to see more “constructive” (or optimistic) films replace “pessimistic” (or subversive) ones at Locarno. ASCT, 3.1.15, V2: letter from the head of the FDHA’s Film Section to Beretta, 13.08.1962.

52. It is worth noting that the new audience of the festival, mainly composed of students, was less profitable for the local economy, since they were less likely to stay in expansive hotels, eat in fancy restaurants and spend their money in luxury stores.

53. Cin, CSL011, box 12: minutes of the meeting of the Federal Film Commission, 18.11.1970; ASCT, 3.1.15, V14: letter from Bianconi to the FIAPF, 28.10.1967.

54. Bl, “Wird Locarno zur zweiten ‘Berlinale’?”, in *Schweizer Film Suisse*, no. 10, October 1970: 3–4.

55. ASCT, 3.1.15, C9: minutes of the executive commission of the festival, 27.10.1968.



the intellectual, artistic, and professional center of tomorrow's cinema,"<sup>56</sup> his support for the LFF became rather evanescent. Thereby, because they lost the support their predecessors had so laboriously gained, the directors had to negotiate hard to obtain the right to organize an international competition devoted to "new world cinema", a convoluted way to combine their interest for young filmmakers and Third World movies.

Having gained the reputation of turning Locarno into a "red festival", Bianconi and Buache knew that they had to "obey Düby on certain points in order to better preserve [their] freedom of maneuver on others."<sup>57</sup> However, after four editions marked by radical programming choices and some political unrest,<sup>58</sup> Bianconi and Buache quitted, discouraged by "the indifference, incomprehension, and hostility of public opinion" towards their vision for the festival.<sup>59</sup> In a private letter, Buache later explained his disappointment to see Locarno, which was becoming "one of the most original [film festivals] in world [for] young international cinema, disgusted by the commercial fairs of Cannes or Berlin and the Venice mess [,] returning to the open air, that is to say to tourism."<sup>60</sup> As it turned out, without proper political support, the cultural ambitions of Locarno were kept in check.

Immediately after their resignation, an *ad interim* management organized the return of the festival to the outdoor (on the Piazza Grande, in the center of the city) and to the high tourist season. This decision was encouraged and financially supported by Pro Locarno,<sup>61</sup> which "feared that Chur, Lausanne, Lucerne or Zurich would jump at the chance to take their place."<sup>62</sup> If, like Buache, many cinephiles considered that "the identity of Locarno had been sacrificed and betrayed" (Schlappner 1987: 69), the situation was in fact very different from that of the 1950s. The global disruption of the late 1960s had indeed opened the way for more independent programming (Moine 2011). Most notably, following the example set by Cannes and Berlin with their alternative selections for "new cinema" (Thévenin 2009, Cowie 2010), a *Tribune libre* dedicated to more experimental movies was created in Locarno in the early 1970s. This change was personified by the new director Moritz de Hadeln, who had founded the Nyon documentary film festival with his wife Erika a few years earlier.

In 1972, de Hadeln became the manager of the Swiss Society of International Film Festivals, a newly created administrative entity supported by the federal administration, allowing him to run Locarno and Nyon simultaneously (Hadeln 1988). Often described as a man of consensus, Locarno's new director successfully reconciled tourists, film professionals, and cinephiles during his six years in office. Next to the official competition and the screenings on the Piazza Grande, festivalgoers could then find what they were looking for in different sections, such as *Tribune libre*, the Critics' Week (by the International Federation of Film Critics), or *Information suisse* (an initiative dedicated to Swiss cinema launched in 1969 by Bianconi and Buache). De Hadeln also notably created a Film Market, an experiment only briefly attempted before in 1964 (by imposition of the FI-APF).<sup>63</sup> Aiming at specializing Locarno in young filmmakers and Third World cinema like his predecessors, he invented a rather vague formulation ("new cinematographic perspectives") allowing Locarno to stay in the FI-APF's A category. Therefore, despite some minor polemics, the relationships between economic and cultural stakeholders became more harmonious in the 1970s.

56. ASCT, 3.1.15, V14: letter from FIAPF to the festival, 13.11.1967.

57. Cin, CSL1-35/4: Buache to Bianconi, 14.03.1969.

58. Besides the general critics from the Swiss German press against the choices of both directors (who were known leftist), in 1968, Switzerland did not escape the protests that had previously shaken Cannes, Berlin, and Venice. Firstly, the international jury presided by Czech director Jiří Menzel – who initially considered boycotting the Soviet, Hungarian and East German movies to protest the crushing of the Prague Spring by the Warsaw Pact troops – decided to step down in favour of the youth jury. Secondly, the closing ceremony of Locarno was disturbed by young activists, who occupied the Kursaal cinema to protest against the bourgeois character of the event (a similar critic was addressed to Venice that year).

59. ASCT, 3.1.15, C29: letter from Buache and Bianconi to the festival, 04.10.1970.

60. ASCT, 3.1.15, S3: letter from Buache to Bixio Candolfi, 24.08.1971.

61. ASCT, 2.2.80, box 47: letter from the direction of Pro Locarno to the members of the executive committee, 20.07.1971.

62. René Dasen, "Locarno 1971: un festival de transition", in *Schweizer Film Suisse*, no. 9, September 1971: 17.

63. One year after Venice launched a similar initiative, Cannes' *Marché du Film* was first established in 1951, but it was only officialized in 1959. Comparatively, before Berlin launched the European Film Market in 1978, its *Film Messe* was created in 1973.

## Conclusion

As a grassroots event without any political support, the Locarno Film Festival was originally dominated by the commercial interests of the tourism and the film industries. In the early 1950s, the festival embarked on a quest for autonomy and independence. But as soon as it demonstrated its artistic aspirations, partly contradicting the agenda of its main stakeholders, the LFF entered an area of turbulence. In a weak position because of a lack of support at the federal level, it was cancelled twice and was subjected to growing political criticism. These difficulties eventually triggered a reaction from the state, allowing the event to find a common ground with the FIAPF and to specialize in “new cinema” during the 1960s. Nevertheless, the radical attempt of transforming the festival into an alternative celebration of world cinema in the late 1960s met again with the resistance of the tourism and the film industries and eventually came to an end. Finally, Moritz de Hadeln succeeded in internationalizing and stabilizing the LFF during the 1970s. Thanks to a new balance between tourism and cinephilia in the global film festivals landscape, and with a strong support from the Confederation, Locarno made a fresh start under better auspices.

Locarno’s history illustrates eloquently that “creating the conditions for a cinephilic experience is not a film festival’s only consideration. These are, after all, film *festivals*” (Czach 2010: 144). Every film festival had to negotiate in order to impose its cultural agenda in a field deeply subjugated to economic and political pressures (Pisu 2017). But as this article argued, if Locarno’s claim for autonomy echoed similar aspirations from other film festivals during the 1950s and the 1960s, the peculiarity of the Swiss case certainly was that the struggle was not waged against the state, but rather was a quest for more recognition from the authorities. For example, while the transmission of official invitations via diplomatic channels (a requirement from the FIAPF to give national producers’ association a decisive role in the selection of movies) was considered by major film festivals as a constraint and a subjection to commercial logics, for Locarno, it represented one mean of gaining legitimacy and opening its doors to more diverse productions thanks to Switzerland’s neutrality.<sup>64</sup>

In this respect, the LFF’s first twenty-five years appear as a period of growing discrepancy between the tourism and the film industries on one side, and the so-called cinephiles (film critics, film clubs, *Cinémathèque*) on the other, with the state playing an increasingly important mediating role in economic and political conflicts. Much research still has to be conducted to understand more precisely how cultural institutions, political organisms, and economic actors shaped Locarno’s identity. Thereby, we close our argument with a call to further exploration of the LFF’s massive archival material and to deeper analysis of the negotiations and the struggles that took place beyond the 1970s, with one quote from the *Cahiers du cinéma*, which still considered in 1982 that Locarno was caught “between a sincere cinephilic will on the part of its organizers, and a too directly economic calculation (tourism) operated by the regional authorities.”<sup>65</sup>

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64. It should however be mentioned that Bern entertained no diplomatic relations with socialist régimes such as the German Democratic Republic, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, Albania, and North Korea until the early 1970s.

65. Serge Le Péron, “Locarno 1982. Auteurs où êtes-vous ?”, *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 341, 1982 : III.

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