

Today we are all gathered to celebrate the 78th edition of the Locarno Film Festival, which was founded immediately after the Second World War and in many ways as a direct response to it. The first screenings took place from 23 August to 2 September 1946 in the sublimely beautiful park of the Grand Hôtel, even before the Nuremberg Trials had prematurely come to an end on 1 October. That year, Roberto Rossellini's unforgettable 'Rome, Open City', was screened here in Locarno, followed two years later by his equally haunting 'Germany, Year Zero', for which he received in 1948 the "Gran Premio", predecessor of the Golden Leopard. Both films helped to shape the tone and sense of urgency that have always characterised this festival. Over the decades, it has become an important refuge for free thought and artistic creativity in our often troubled and unsettling world, a refuge that needs our constant care and attention, especially now that artistic and cinematic production is facing a multitude of cultural and political challenges as well as competing economic systems.

It could be argued that the festival's format is informed and even driven by a centuries-old culture of direct democracy and its general practice of neutrality, mediation, arbitration, open dialogue and consensus building and that is unique to this small and stable Alpine republic - at the heart of Europe - with its four constitutionally protected linguistic cultures and identities, which are in constant exchange with each other and at the same time

firmly believe in peaceful coexistence, despite the existential challenges it has had to confront from time to time just like anybody else.

Here at Locarno, it has been almost eighty years of unlimited and boundless cinematic and intellectual discoveries, countless advances in the critical understanding of the world that surrounds and sustains us, full of tears of joy and empathy.

As we have heard, the festival was founded in 1946 and has always been primarily dedicated to promoting film as a critical medium of cultural production and intellectual enlightenment, which *per se* transcends cultural and political boundaries. In contrast to the exclusivity of nationally spoken and written languages, the medium of film makes use of a great richness of visual, spatial, motional and acoustic forms of expression that enable us to overcome established national cultural barriers as well as collective stereotypes, memories and perceptions. Moving images move us. Film thus promotes, like other forms of art, a universal human understanding and a general awareness that every form of physical, material and immaterial migration will eventually lead to an ensuing existential and cultural enrichment, be it in knowledge or art, as has been the case since the dawn of humanity.

Since its inception, the festival has also stood for generations of hope, hope for lasting European and universal peace. Hope, too, that it will never be too late to learn from history, even if it sometimes seems as if we have only just begun.

This year also marks the 100th anniversary of the signing of the Locarno Treaties, which were negotiated in eleven decisive days in October 1925 at nearby Via della Pace No. 6. There, Aristide Briand, Austen Chamberlain and Gustav Stresemann, along with many other European political representatives, supported by their experienced advisers and an understanding press, all ready for change, formulated ideas, concepts and a number of rules of how to overcome the unimaginable, the unspeakable losses, pain and horror suffered by millions of people in the First World War. It was time to focus on reaching out instead of closing off again. Everyone deserves a second chance, and sometimes even a third, it is said, if they are particularly lucky. At the heart of the negotiations was a renewed conviction that future peaceful settlements of disputes between nations could and should be achieved exclusively through diplomatic means. Legendarily, Switzerland was not an official participant, but actively and discreetly hosted the negotiations on the shores of this undoubtedly beautiful lake and its surrounding mountains, once again at the heart of Europe.

The result was that we still talk about the ‘Spirit of Locarno’ today. But where spirits cast their spell, ghosts are often not far away. Tragically, the ‘Spirit of Locarno’ was short-lived before it had to be revived again, which it eventually was, this time more promisingly after the even greater catastrophe that followed, the Second World War and the Shoah.

Talking more generally of Locarno, it was Simone Weil, the French philosopher and European intellectual, who reminded us in ‘La pesanteur et la grâce’ (in English: ‘Gravity and Grace’, written up during the cruellest moments of the Second World War and published posthumously in 1947 by Gustave Thibon) that everything of value in our lives comes to us [Quote] ‘as a loan that must be constantly renewed’. [End of quote]

Finally, I would like to draw your attention to two pictures and read another short quote, all three of which testify to the very ‘Spirit of Locarno’ of the late 1920s and have clearly lost none of their relevance and urgency today. The picture shows a print by the German expressionist artist Otto Heinrich Strohmeyer, who was commissioned by the German-Jewish cultural historian Aby Warburg to design an airmail stamp meant to convey the essence

of what Warburg had felt was the meaning and outcome of the Locarno negotiations: 'IDEA VINCIT'.

The idea is that reason is in the end invincible and must prevail, as it is all-encompassing and unstoppable in its upward striving. Warburg dedicated this rare print to Briand, Chamberlain and Stresemann as a sign of personal and lasting appreciation and sent it to them. In the 1920s, more than many other cultural innovations of the time, aeroplanes and moving images alike had become optimistic carrier symbols of global exchange and universal progress.

A few weeks before the death of this remarkable historian in Hamburg, the then British Labour Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald had once again invoked the 'Spirit of Locarno' on 3 September 1929 before the League of Nations in Geneva with the following imploring words, when the world seemed to be once again on the brink of disaster, as reported in *The Times* of 4 September 1929:

[Quote] "The greatest test of enlightenment in these days is to show our willingness to reduce armaments, to banish from our mind all idea of security, and to throw ourselves with courage unflinchingly into this position, that we trust men and women and

nations who come and make bargains with us. We will carry out our part, and they will carry out their part, and, in order that that may be done without break, we set up Courts to take the place of arms and conciliation, to take the place of threats, and we agree that reason is the greatest creative power in the universe." [End of quote]

His early death spared Warburg an enormous deception and worse, while his research institute could be successfully relocated to London in 1933, where it was saved from destruction and can continue to this day to explore the impact of the power of images and cultural memory on our thinking. Since 1946, the Locarno Film Festival has brought back much of what was lost between 1933 and 1945, whilst nonetheless much had gone forever. Ultimately, both institutions, the Locarno Film Festival and the Warburg Institute, as different as they may appear, owe something to the 'Spirit of Locarno' and stand for the survival of civilisation and the care with which it is nurtured. *Idea vincit*, after all? May it prevail in a time that, in 1989, was all too easily convinced that history could ever come to an end.

Quotes:

Simone Weil, *La pesanteur et la grâce*, Paris: Plon, 1947, p. 80
(quoted in: Snyder, 2024, p. 58).

‘Disarmament and Peace. Mr Macdonald's Speech at Geneva’, in:
The Times, 4 September 1929, p. 11c-d (quoted in: McEwan, 2004,
p. 373; compared with the original, 30 July 2025).