

Philosophy vs. Realpolitik: Discussing European Cinema Competitiveness Crisis Through 'Alice and the Mayor'

by Ruken Doğu Erdede

The Europa Cinemas Label is an award created during the 2003 Directors' Fortnight (Cannes) that recognizes the best European film at five festivals throughout the year, including Berlin, Karlovy Vary, Locarno, Venice, and Cannes. The winners receive distribution support from the Europa Cinemas Network, an association of exhibitors representing over 3,000 screens in Europe and beyond. [*Alice and the Mayor*](#), directed by Nicolas Pariser, was awarded the 2019 prize in the Directors' Fortnight section at Cannes Film Festival. The film depicts the story of Paul Théraneau (Fabrice Luchini), the fictitious socialist mayor of Lyon, who hires Alice Heimann (Anaïs Demoustier), a Ph.D. in philosophy, to help him generate new ideas, pitting realpolitik against philosophy. Against this backdrop, the film's thematic preoccupations map onto scholarly discussions of the crisis of European cinema's competitiveness at the bifurcation of protecting European core values and competing with the entertainment market.

The Euro-crisis that began in 2010, Brexit, and more recently, the refugee crisis, pose political, economic, and cultural challenges to European identity concerning some core values, including democracy, human rights, and constitutional regulations. (Sassatelli, 2015; Leith and Sim et al., 2019) So, what 'European' refers to becomes a crucial question. At the institutional level, the European Union declares its policy motto "united in diversity." Although this statement may point to specific indicators at the legislative level, it is necessary to look at how it works in practice to grasp it. Sassatelli proposes that looking into cultural policy initiatives relevant to identity-building is noteworthy since "European identity is very much still in the process of being made and is still heavily contested." Given that European cinema policy functions under the same parameters as other EU initiatives on cultural policies and that its products are part of a multi-billion-dollar global business, it is crucial to analyze how European cinema positions itself in constructing European identity and the global film industry. As Forbes and Street argue, this situation highlights a dilemma for European cinema: whether to take advantage of the global film market boom or follow public policy and promote cultural diversity (2017). The reason for this dilemma is that European cinema is often perceived as art cinema inclined with alternative aesthetic and thematic preoccupations, in contrast to Hollywood's commercial cinema, which dominates the global film market. Although it is debatable how functional this comparison is (Elsaesser, 2014), it is often stated that European cinema is in a competitiveness crisis, thinking of the domination of Hollywood and the rising popularity of Indian and Chinese cinema. So which path will European cinema follow: maintaining the position of freedom in cinematic practices on the margin or adapting to the market to compete? Or is it possible to combine both?

This bifurcation is well reflected in *Alice and the Mayor*, which was awarded the best European film at Cannes with a timely judgment. The film depicts the story of the socialist mayor of Lyon, who has been in politics for thirty years and is blocked from coming up with novel ideas in the face of the new century's challenges, such as the ecological crisis, globalization, and city branding. He describes his situation as "I am a big engine, without power. I did not think anything in twenty years." For help, he hires Alice, who has a Ph.D. in

philosophy, to a newly invented unit called "futurology" to fill the engine to strengthen the city's vision for the 2500th anniversary. However, Alice's relationship with politics is limited to the philosophy of political theory. Thus, the film confronts realpolitik and philosophy. In this regard, the film's preoccupation with philosophy vs. realpolitik maps onto the ambivalence, as mentioned earlier, of protecting the marginality of European cinema in line with European core values or competing with the global film market. Alice and the mayor's and his office's arguments reflect this situation. While Alice defends the core values of enlightenment and opposes the projects that "wants to turn the city into a theme park," her ideas are incompatible with the current neoliberal, project-oriented political model. Here, Alice's position, i.e., philosophy, overlaps with the view defending European cinema's freedom of creation at the margins. In contrast, realpolitik dynamics overlap with global film competitiveness logic. What will be the end of this conflict?

Ultimately, the mayor agrees with Alice's philosophical position and prepares a radical speech that defies the current politics with her to become the head of the socialist party. However, he hesitates, loses this chance, and quits his political career. Surprisingly, Alice continues to be involved in politics, working at the French embassy abroad. The days of old-style politics are certainly over in the 21st century, yet there is still time for practical politics based on philosophical ideals. European identity is in a state of flux. European cinema is a vital component of the cultural initiatives that support identity-building in line with the "united in diversity." While protecting its core values, European cinema wants to catch up in the global film market expansion. Significantly, *Alice and the Mayor* was awarded the Best European Film since it reflects European cinema's ambivalent situation. Although it is difficult to resolve this dilemma, Alice's continuation in politics as a philosopher at the end of the film can be an inspiration. There is no need to give up either philosophy or realpolitik, so there is no need to give up artistic freedom or global film market competition. There may be a new way with certain compromises whose degree will determine the actual solution.

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