



Policy Brief

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Developing young people's Engagement with European Cinema via the Youth Audience Award

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Who is this aimed at

- managers at the European Film Academy and policymakers
- officers responsible for film at the European Commission

Key messages

The European Film Academy's Young Audience Award (YAA) is an important film prize that deserves wider recognition and appreciation among diverse audiences, filmmakers, producers, educators, and policymakers. The YAA has great potential to promote European youth films, pay attention to young people as an important audience segment, promote multilingualism and cultural diversity in Europe, and build competencies for future European film professionals. The European Film Academy has ambitious plans to develop these activities in the future. Better communication, promotion, and funding are likely to increase the YAA's impact on the European film industry and boost young people's engagement with European cinema.

Introduction

The competitiveness of the European film industry relies on audiences interested in viewing European films. The European Film Academy seeks to build future competitiveness of the European film industry by engaging young people as audiences of European cinema through the YAA. The YAA is a category of the European Film Awards, supported by the EU through its Creative Europe Media programme. The Academy has awarded YAAs to European films since 2012. Young people aged 12–14 years from 42 European countries, plus Israel, Palestine, and Australia, form the juries that choose the winner.

Besides being a film award, the YAA selection process is a transnational, constantly evolved film initiative including social, cultural, and film-industry-focused aims. Over the years, there have been major changes in the selection procedure of three nominated films, increasing the role and agency of the young people in the process. In 2020, the European Film Academy started to develop a European Film Club as a platform linking the YAA jury members and film and cinema professionals. The social and cultural aims of the YAA are reflected in educational materials that the European Film Academy has provided for the young jury members and their teachers since 2017.



Statement of the problem

Despite the EU's dedication to promote European cinema to create future audiences, there is still little academic research on young Europeans' conceptions about and attitudes toward European cinema. Previous research also includes some contradictory results. Soto-Sanfiel et al. have indicated that European youth prefer US cinema and have a stereotypical image of European films considering them more intellectual, artistic, boring, and of lower quality compared to US cinema (Soto-Sanfiel et al., 2018, 2021). Veenstra et al. have shown that young Belgians prefer US films to European ones and national films to other European films. They point out that structural limitations affect the film viewing practices, especially among young people. The current infrastructure favours Hollywood productions and that is what audiences all over Europe like to watch. National cinemas poorly circulate in Europe (Veenstra et al., 2022). These results resonate with Mitric's study (2022) indicating that young European audiences prefer films in which the characters speak either their mother tongue or English.

Soto-Sanfiel et al. (2018, 2021) have shown that film paedagogical activities do not significantly impact or change the students' attitudes to European cinema while Mitric's (2022) research indicated that film literacy education may promote the reception and consumption of European arthouse cinema and, thus, increase its social and economic impact through extended audiences.

The previous studies suggest that European cinema needs to be promoted to young audiences more effectively. The YAA has great potential in this regard, especially through its paedagogical elements and attempts to engage young people with European cinema, but the award and the awarded films suffer from poor visibility.

Context

This policy brief is based on a study conducted in the REBOOT project in spring 2023 (Hiltunen & Lähdesmäki, 2023). The study aimed at exploring how the European Film Academy seeks to build the future competitiveness of the European film industry by engaging young people as audiences of European cinema and to analyse the preferences of 12–14-year-old cinema audiences in Europe through the YAA.

The data of the study consisted of the eleven YAA winning films, the European Film Academy's website, the educational materials about the YAA winning films, an online meeting with the representatives of the European Film Academy, and email interviews with one of them. The research was conducted using the methods of thematic analysis of the films and critical close reading of the other material.

The thematic analysis of the winning films revealed three, broad, and partly overlapping themes that recurred in the stories of the films: coming of age, belonging, social challenges. The success of



dramas and serious content may seem surprising, because a large part of mainstream children's and youth films are action-packed adventures, especially in Hollywood productions.

Existing Policy Gap

During the years, the European Commission has sought to tackle the poor productivity of the European film industry by launching new strategies and policies. In the EU strategy on European film in the digital era, the Commission notes how 63% of all films released in the EU in 2012 were European, but only 33% of the admissions came from European films, while US productions accounted for 20% of releases and 65% of admissions (EC, 2014). There haven't been any major changes in the productivity of European productions. In 2021, for instance, the market share by US productions in the EU was 58%, while European films dropped from the record high of 39% in 2020 to 27%, being in line with levels before the Covid-19 pandemic (Cabrera Blázquez et al., 2023).

Awarding prizes is a common practice impacting diverse societal sectors, including film, in today's attention economy. There is an increasing number of film awards hosted by local, regional, national, and transnational actors. Film awards are a tool to impact the sector by raising interest towards the awarded films and bringing the prize-giving organisations to the spotlight and promoting their goals and value discourses. Film awards are brands, and the brands have power only when they are strong enough – i.e., when they are broadly recognised, competed for, and appreciated among film professionals and audiences.

The strategies and policies of the European film industry lack concrete measures to link the productivity of the European film industry, film awards, the communication and branding of (awarded) European films, and the engagement of young people with European cinema.

Policy recommendations

Despite its limited scope, this study has several policy implications.

1. The YAA could be better utilised for increasing young people's engagement with European cinema

The YAA has great potential for engaging young people with European cinema. The European Film Academy has already taken steps to broaden the YAA initiative by enabling 15–19-year-old teenagers' involvement via the recently established European Film Club.

The pedagogical material of the YAA could be developed into a European film literacy learning programme that utilises the best practices and lessons learned from previous film literacy programmes created in European (see e.g., European Film Factory 2023) and national projects (see e.g., Mitric, 2022 for the Danish initiative of Med Skolen i Biografen/School Cinema and JEF n.d. for promoting film



literacy in Belgium; see EFAD n.d. for examples of national film education initiatives). A European-level film literacy learning programme could have intertwined cultural and social aims. The social themes and topics recurring in the YAA films support including such aims in the learning programme. An open-access research-based pedagogical learning programme could strengthen the platform and benefit various stakeholders more broadly, namely students and teachers in formal and informal educational institutions who do not participate in the YAA awarding process and are not members of the European Film Club.

2. The YAA could be better communicated

The European Film Academy, European youth film producers, and the broad audience interested in youth films might benefit from a more transparent awarding process at the YAA. The YAA has great potential to advance the genre of youth film and the notion of young people as an important audience segment. This potential can be fulfilled through better public communication and promotion of the YAA and the awarded films. The EU's long-term support for communication and promotion activities is crucial.

3. The YAA films could be better accessed via VOD platforms

Better access increases YAA films' recognition and may increase their social and economic impact through extended audiences. The lack of a common European VOD platform(s) is a major challenge that the EU needs to address soon. The total admissions of the YAA films as reported in European Audiovisual Observatory's Lumiere database reveal that the films' distribution is limited to a small number of European countries and that most of each film's theatre admissions are domestic.

4. The YAA films could be made more accessible via translation

The accessibility of the YAA films would increase through multilingual subtitles and/or dubbing. The EU could support the translation of subtitles for the YAA films, as it does with the films awarded the LUX Audience Prize. Multilingual subtitling promotes linguistic and cultural diversity in Europe.

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Disclaimer

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