

DEVELOPING THE OUTREACH AND IMPACT OF EUROPEAN AUDIENCE FILM AWARDS

Introduction

Film awards are an essential component of the film industry. They indicate a film's quality and success and reflect the preferences of the awarding authorities, who are typically established film professionals. Thus, awards are often considered an important factor when evaluating the competitiveness of films and the European film industry as a whole (e.g., Hiltunen & Lähdesmäki, 2025a; Abay et al., 2024; Simonton, 2009). They are also a means by which the authorities govern the industry, impacting the notions and perceptions of quality and novelty in the sector (Lähdesmäki & Hiltunen, 2026; Foret & Calligaro, 2019). However, awards presented by established professionals may distance the public from the award process and disregard their preferences. Nevertheless, the public can engage with the film industry and the negotiation of good films through audience film awards. Moreover, such awards have the potential to increase the visibility and audience of nominated and winning films, strengthening their competitiveness. The broader the audience engaged, the greater the positive impact. The European Union (EU) and the European Film Academy have recognised the potential of audience film awards, as demonstrated by the LUX European Audience Film Award and the Young Audience Award (YAA). Both awards are based on a broad, transnational audience vote for the best film. There are no other such broad, transnational audience film awards in the world.

LUX and YAA are categories of the European Film Awards, which are run annually by the European Film Academy. One of the major financiers of the European Film Awards is the European Union's Creative Europe programme, specifically its MEDIA strand. Furthermore, the LUX category has a direct link with EU policymakers, as half of the votes in the awarding process come from members of the European Parliament. The EU has a long history of awarding prizes in various cultural fields. These awards aim to highlight the European dimension of culture, promote European values and social goals, and strengthen the concept of a European cultural area in which cultural actors collaborate, and cultural products are consumed across national borders (Lähdesmäki, 2024). In addition to the cultural dimension, EU cultural prizes have an economic rationale, such as increasing the competitiveness of the European film industry in European and global markets (Lähdesmäki & Hiltunen, 2026). The power of cultural prizes stems from the attention they garner from various audiences. In the case of audience film awards, this power stems from public engagement in the viewing, reviewing, and voting processes.

This chapter approaches film awards as instruments for governing cultural and social goals and fostering competitiveness. It introduces these two awards and their awarding policies, discussing their potential to engage European film audiences and increase the competitiveness of the European film industry. Based on the investigation of the awards,

their awarding processes, and competitiveness (Hiltunen & Lähdesmäki, 2025a; Hiltunen & Lähdesmäki, 2025b; Lähdesmäki & Hiltunen, 2026; Hiltunen & Lähdesmäki, 2026), the chapter also identifies several weaknesses and lost potential. The chapter ends with recommendations for the European Parliament, the European Commission, the European Film Academy, and the various intermediary stakeholders involved in organising these awards suggesting improving the visibility, availability, and promotion of nominated films.

Young Audience Award

Awarding process and goals

The YAA was established in 2012 and has been awarded every year since. Initially, juries of young people aged 12–14 from European countries chose the winner from among three nominated films. Over the years, the number of countries involved has increased. In 2022, over 3,000 jury members from 42 European countries, as well as Israel, Palestine, and Australia voted for their favourite film. Juries watch the films in cinemas or online during uncommercial screenings organised by national partners of the European Film Academy, including film festivals, film centres, film agencies, and film educational organisations. In 2020, the Academy began developing the European Film Club in collaboration with young people. It is a platform that allows young people to discuss European cinema also outside of the competition. The platform became one way to participate in the voting, and it opened the competition to young people up to the age of 19.

The selection procedure for the nominated films has changed over the years, giving young people more agency. Until 2018, the nominees were directly chosen by five adult film experts. After that a small jury of young people chose the three nominees from films preselected by the experts. In 2022, for the first time young people participated in the pre-selection together with the experts (email correspondence with European Film Academy, 23 March, 13 April and 6 June 2023). In the final stage, the young audiences from around Europe form a broad jury that watches all three nominated films and vote anonymously.

Between 2012 and 2022, 40–60 films fitting the Academy's eligibility criteria were annually submitted to the YAA competition. The films must be full-length European productions, and the director must be born in Europe and hold a European passport. There are additional criteria for a *European film* based upon the Council of Europe Convention on Cinematographic Co-production (CETS No. 220). Eligibility requirements also include at least one of the following: previous awards, festival visibility, or theatrical distribution in at least two European countries (European Film Academy, 2022; email correspondence with European Film Academy, 6 June 2023).

In addition to its core educational mission of promoting European cinema to young people, the YAA's general social aims include building bridges between cultures, facilitating peaceful exchanges of views, raising awareness of social issues, empowering young people, fostering a greater understanding of one's European neighbours, and offering the experience of being an active member of the European community.

Methodology and results

Our study aimed to understand what kind of youth films young people and film experts prefer and how the YAA has contributed to increasing the competitiveness of European cinema. First, thematic and style analysis of the 11 winning films was conducted to identify the films' key themes and their main stylistic characteristics. The features of the films were discussed in relation to previous studies on youth films and the film preferences of young people. The film analysis thus combined inductive qualitative analysis and theory-driven exploration. Second, data about the award was collected through desk research and by interviewing and discussing more freely with the representatives of the European Film Academy. This data and data about the winning films, such as admission numbers and the number of other awards received, were used to explore the recognition and impact of the award.

The thematic analysis identified three key themes: coming of age, belonging, and social challenges. The films dealt with various socially relevant and timely topics and brought out serious issues, such as bullying, impacting on the lives of young people. These themes are typical of youth films (Driscoll 2011), but stylistically the YAA films differed from popular youth films that are commonly adventurous and humorous. Based on the 11 YAA winning films, the study concluded that young people prefer realistic contemporary dramas, which are quite different from the action films they prefer according to earlier research (Soto-Sanfiel et al., 2018; 2021).

Because the analysis of the YAA revealed the central role of adults in the awarding process, it was concluded that the winning films reflect not only the preferences of the youth, but also those of the adult film professionals and the structure of the competition. If drama was the most typical genre of the films selected for the competition it is logical that many such films were awarded.

Regarding the potential of the YAA to promote European youth films the study concludes that the winning films have had very limited distribution in European countries. This may be improved with the development of the European Film Club in the future. The award itself was found to be relatively unknown.

LUX

Awarding process and goals

In 2007, the European Parliament launched the LUX Film Prize as a symbolic gesture of its commitment to culture. For over a decade, Members of Parliament selected the winning film from a shortlist prepared by professionals and approved by the Committee on Culture and Education. In 2020, the award was rebranded as the LUX European Audience Film Award, and the European Film Academy, the European Commission, and Europa Cinemas began administering the award alongside the Parliament. Since then, nominees have been selected from films submitted to the European Film Awards. Winners are chosen through a 50/50 weighting of public votes and Member of Parliament ratings. With this change, the LUX became one of the 24 categories in the Academy's annual awards. Voting takes place on the LUX rating platform, with participation varying considerably. Around 45,000 ratings were submitted in 2023, about 22,000 in 2024, and nearly 33,000 in 2025 (Hiltunen & Lähdesmäki, 2025a). These fluctuations illustrate the challenges and potential of engaging citizens in pan-European cultural initiatives.

Like other EU cultural awards, the LUX Prize blends cultural, social, and economic goals with political aspirations. It highlights European cinema as an art form and an industry while fostering cultural exchange and appreciation of Europe's diversity. Today, LUX stands out as one of the few transnational audience awards in which citizens from all 27 EU member states can vote for their preferred film. The award's eligibility rules emphasize both the European dimension and previous recognition. Films must be European, which is defined as being produced or co-produced in the EU or select non-EU countries, or involving professionals affiliated with them. Films must also have gained recognition at a major festival.

The award's value stems from its brand rather than its financial reward. Its financial support is channeled through translation. Nominated films are subtitled in all 24 official EU languages, and the winning film receives additional support in the form of adaptations for audiences with visual or hearing impairments. These measures aim to improve accessibility and distribution opportunities across Europe (Baschiera & Di Chiara, 2028; Stjernholm, 2026). The European Parliament created the award to increase the visibility of nominated films and help them reach audiences that might otherwise not have access to them (European Parliament, 2023). However, our study shows that such a wide reach is not always achieved (Lähdesmäki et al., 2025; Hiltunen & Lähdesmäki, 2025a).

Methodology and results

Our study had two aims. First, we used qualitative content analysis to explore the style and content of the winning films, determine their genres, and identify common themes. Second, we examined the effectiveness of LUX in enhancing the competitiveness of the winning films and how their competitiveness has evolved since LUX's establishment. Specifically, we examined how the transformation of the prize into an audience award impacted its ability to promote European film. Additionally, we compared the competitiveness of LUX-winning films to European films that have won more prominent film awards, such as the Palme d'Or and the Oscar for Best International Feature Film. We explored LUX's competitiveness by comparing extensive statistical datasets and conducting a correlation analysis of several economic and non-economic promotional indicators. These indicators included ticket sales and revenues, distribution and availability on video-on-demand (VOD) platforms, other film awards received, media recognition, and film ratings (Lähdesmäki et al., 2025; Hiltunen & Lähdesmäki, 2025a). The sources used for data gathering were Box Office Mojo, The Numbers, the Lumiere database, the Lumiere VOD database, the Internet Movie Database, focus reports from the European Audiovisual Observatory, the International Index to Film and Television Periodicals/FIAF (ProQuest database), and the International Newstream (ProQuest database).

Our analysis of the style and content of LUX-winning films shows that they tend to be contemporary dramas dealing with serious social and societal issues. The transformation of LUX into an audience award did not significantly impact the content or style of the winning films.

The analysis of LUX-winning film competitiveness shows that an increase in one promotional indicator likely increases the others. However, some noneconomic promotional indicators did not consistently show a statistically significant correlation with the others. This suggests that economic and non-economic promotional indicators are not necessarily aligned (Hiltunen & Lähdesmäki, 2025a). The findings suggest that the transformation of LUX into an audience award did not significantly impact its competitiveness.

A comparison with European Palme d'Or and Oscar Best International Feature Film winners shows that LUX winners are not competitive in the global or European film scenes. While the distribution of LUX winners was not poor, they underperformed in all other areas of promotion explored (Lähdesmäki et al., 2025; Hiltunen & Lähdesmäki, 2025a).

Policy recommendations

Exploring the two transnational European audience film awards yields useful findings for developing their award practices and improving their role in governing the European film industry and its competitiveness. Based on these findings, we recommend the following changes to enhance their outreach and impact.

- **Improve the promotion of both the YAA and the LUX Award:** Both awards should be promoted more effectively to increase their visibility to the public. The YAA has great potential to advance the youth film genre and the notion of young people as an important audience segment for European cinema. This potential can be realised through better public communication and promotion of the YAA itself and the awarded films. Currently, the LUX Award is promoted on the European Parliament's website and social media (Facebook) page, as well as on the websites of the selected cinemas arranging LUX Film Days screenings. However, these sites are not widely followed by the public. Other channels of promotion should be explored, because people cannot vote if they are unaware that such an award exists. Long-term support from the EU is needed to promote both awards.
- **Use the YAA more effectively to boost young people's engagement with European cinema:** The European Film Academy has already taken steps to expand the YAA initiative by enabling teenagers aged 15–19 to get involved via the European Film Club. The pedagogical material of the YAA could be developed into a European-level film literacy learning programme that utilises 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; EFAD n.d. for examples of national film education initiatives). Such programme could have cultural and social aims. 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.
- **Make the nominated LUX films more widely available for viewing:** To encourage greater participation during the voting phase, the nominated films should be made more widely available. Screenings of the films should be organised in more cities, which would also allow for more effective local-level promotion of the award and the films. It would be worth exploring where else; besides Europa Cinemas Network cinemas, the films could be screened. For example, cultural institutions and

educational establishments that already organise cultural events could be suitable venues for screening LUX films.

- **Improve the distribution and streaming of the awarded YAA and LUX films:** The YAA-winners have attracted mostly domestic audiences while the admissions in other European countries have been minimal. Better access via VoD platforms, or the European Film Club, could increase their recognition, as well as their social and economic impact. Improving the international distribution of the award-winning LUX films via cinemas and streaming services would also be beneficial. Currently, admission numbers for the LUX-winning films vary greatly. Resources should be invested in developing distribution strategies for these films.
- **Make the YAA films more accessible via translation:** YAA films could reach bigger audiences through multilingual subtitles and/or dubbing. It is recommended that the EU support this process, as it does with the films awarded the LUX Audience Film Award. Multilingual subtitling promotes linguistic and cultural diversity in Europe.
- **Emphasise LUX's aim to involve citizens:** LUX is one of the few audience awards in Europe. LUX should make this fact into an attraction. Currently, audience and European Parliament votes carry equal weight. However, given that the audience significantly outnumbers the Parliament's members, we recommend reconsidering the voting system. For example, in 2025, 33,000 ratings were given, whereas there are only 720 MEPs. Citizen participation could be strengthened by increasing the weight of the audience vote or even changing the award to be entirely audience-based.

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