



# THE EDUCATIONAL TURN IN FILM FESTIVALS

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## Abstract

This article investigates whether film festivals are undergoing an *educational turn* and argues that this development must be understood through both a historical-theoretical lens and an analysis of evolving European policy frameworks. While early children's film festivals such as Zlín and Giffoni emerged from artistic and civic ambitions, the recent proliferation of youth-oriented festivals since the early 2000s coincides with the European Commission's heightened interest in media literacy and film education. The article situates this trend within a longer genealogy linking film festivals to pedagogical and cultural institutions such as museums, drawing on Bourdieu's theories of cultural formation and scholarship on curation as a mode of critical learning. Against this background, the article's main analysis maps the European policy landscape that has redefined the educational role of film and festivals—from the institutionalization of media literacy in EU directives to its promotion through initiatives such as MEDIA, Creative Europe, and the *Framework for Film Education*. It argues that these policy frameworks have not only supported but also conceptually shaped the contemporary understanding of festivals as spaces of non-formal learning. Ultimately, the educational turn in film festivals reflects a broader reconfiguration of cinema as a tool for cultural engagement, civic participation, and lifelong learning in the digital age.

**Keywords:** Film festivals, film education, film literacy, media literacy, European policy.

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## FİLM FESTİVALLERİNDE EĞİTSEL DÖNÜŞÜM

Öz

Bu makale, film festivallerinin *eğitsel* bir dönüşüm geçirip geçirmediğini incelemekte ve söz konusu gelişmenin hem tarihsel-teorik bir bakış açısıyla hem de değişen Avrupa politika çerçevelerinin analiziyle ele alınması gerektiğini tartışmaktadır. Zlín ve Giffoni gibi erken dönem çocuk film festivalleri sanatsal ve toplumsal amaçlarla ortaya çıkmışken, 2000'li yılların başından itibaren gençlere yönelik festivallerin yaygınlaşması ise Avrupa Komisyonu'nun medya okuryazarlığı ve film eğitimi konularına artan ilgisiyle örtüşmektedir. Makale, bu eğilimi, Bourdieu'nün kültür teorisinden ve küratörlüğü eleştirel bir öğrenme biçimi olarak ele alan akademik çalışmalardan yararlanarak film festivallerini, müzeler gibi pedagojik ve kültürel kurumlarla ilişkilendiren daha geniş bir soyağacı içine yerleştirmektedir. Bu bağlamda, makalenin temel analizi, medya okuryazarlığının AB yönergelerinde kurumsallaştırılmasından, MEDIA, Yaratıcı Avrupa ve *Film Eğitimi Çerçevesi* gibi girişimlerle desteklenmesine kadar uzanan film ve festivallerin eğitsel rolünü yeniden tanımlayan Avrupa politika ortamını haritalandırmaktır. Makale, bu politika çerçevelerinin enformel öğrenme mekânları olarak festivalleri desteklemekle kalmadığını, aynı zamanda festivallere yönelik çağdaş anlayışı da kavramsal düzeyde şekillendirdiğini savunmaktadır. Sonuç olarak, film festivallerindeki bu eğitsel dönüşüm; kültürel katılımın, yurttaşlık katılımının ve yaşam boyu öğrenmenin bir aracı olarak sinemanın, dijital çağda daha kapsamlı bir yeniden yapılanmasını yansıtmaktadır.

**Anahtar sözcükler:** Film festivalleri, film eğitimi, film okuryazarlığı, medya okuryazarlığı, Avrupa politikası.

“Major film festivals are increasingly including programs directed specifically at young people,” Susanna Nelson writes in a piece on the burgeoning kids film festival scene for the journal *Screen Education* (2015). In addition to the attention for children and young audiences in the programming of big film festivals, she goes on, there are numerous local and national film festivals that are dedicated to children and youth exclusively. Nelson’s piece, while focused on the Australia circuit, resonated with my own observations in Europe where I noticed children’s sections popping up at large festivals, family buttons appearing on websites and education officers being integrated into festival teams. Are film festivals undergoing an educational turn, I wondered, and if so, what factors might explain the timing of this this development?

The question of whether there is an educational turn both raises ontological questions about how ‘education’ at film festivals should be defined and beckons a historical perspective to assess the validity of claims about its contemporary emergence. Regarding the former, while associating education primarily with activities for children and young people may appear intuitive, such a view can be contested, whether by drawing on modern theories of lifelong learning (Jarvis 2009) or on historical scholarship concerning the origin of museums (Bennett 1995) and their institutional ties to universities and historical claims to epistemological authority (Simpson 2022). Although the birth of film festivals is distinct from that of museums, certain parallels can be drawn. Christel Taillibert and John Wäfler, for example, argue that the path towards the creation of the Venice film festival in the early 1930s should be understood as a renewal of existing moving image education models (2016). At a time when educational film dominated the relation between cinema and education, the event in Venice was crucial for the recognition of cinema as art, and as such repositioned cinema as a tool to elevate the minds and refine the taste of the masses, much like nineteenth century museums aimed at civilizing and disciplining the people. In my own work I have frequently turned to Bourdieuan thinking to explain how festivals themselves create the audiences that are interested and capable of consuming the films shown at festival events (e.g. 2014, 2016). Others emphasise the field-configuring potential of curation, such as Douglas Rosenberg, who favours the criticality of curation – that contributes to “an elevated discussion over meaning, purpose, form and content” (2009: 76) – over programming’s penchant for showcasing new productions, expecting the spectator to ultimately benefit from the deeper engagement

with cinematic works. Each of these perspectives arguably includes an educational dimension in its framework for film festivals, albeit one that differs from a narrower understanding of education as programming for children and young people.

The equation of education with programs and activities for children and youth, however, does correspond by and large with present-day festival discourse, in which the term 'education' is reserved for young audiences. As such, if there is an educational turn in film festivals today, it must, at minimum, be connected to children and youth. This raises the second question, whether the present attention for young demographic groups represents a significant shift from earlier times. Should this issue be resolved favourably, I argue that film festivals scholars should expand their research to include new lines of research that advance the theorisation of festivals' role within media and film education.

Let's start with a brief examination of the birth of film festivals for children and youth. The oldest example is the Zlín Film Festival, founded in 1961 in the city of Zlín, located in what at the time is Czechoslovakia. The film festival for children in Zlín is closely tied to the city's history as an industrial town. In the 1930s the town's success was supported by what Thomas Elsaesser, Vinzenz Hediger and Patrick Vonderau have called a *Medienverbund* – a network of media clustered around urban or industrial complexes (Hediger and Vonderau 2009).<sup>1</sup> The local Baťa footwear corporation did not only provide housing for its workers, set up a transport system and constructed important public buildings, but it also built film studios, movie theatres, and a factory for radio receivers. These film studios would lead to a golden age in local cinematic creativity and production which Petr Szczepanik notes "surpassed most of the conventional feature production in Prague" (2009: 351). Zlín became especially renowned for its documentary and animation production with famous puppet film directors like Karel Zeman and Hermína Týrlová, and children were taken seriously as audience from the very beginning. It was also in Zlín that the first film festival of the country was organized. In 1940 and 1941 the festival 'Film Harvest' showcased national cinema productions in the presence of major stars. For a permanent film festival in Zlín, however, the focus would settle in 1961 on the audiences central to the local filmmaking tradition: children and youth.

<sup>1</sup> For an excellent account of this *Medienverbund* in Zlín in the 1930s see Petr Szczepanik, 2009.

As the historic origin of the Zlín Film Festival suggests, the emergence of a film festival dedicated to children and youth was determined more by local circumstances than part of a broader trend. A decade later only a handful of such festivals are organized in Europe, specifically focusing on children's media. Among these, two moreover are closely linked to the rise of television: in 1963 the International Children's cinema and TV contest (*Certamen Internacional de Cine y TV Infantil*) was held for the first time in Gijón, northwest Spain; and in 1964, Prix Jeunesse was founded in Munich to support quality children's television. A major landmark in the history of youth film festivals came in 1971, with the establishment of the seminal Giofanni Film Festival by Claudio Gubitosi – then only 18 years old – in his hometown Giofanni Valle Piane, a small town south from Naples, Italy. Gubitosi introduced a youth jury model, giving young participants an active role as jurors. Beyond viewing films, they were encouraged to engage in discussions with peers and filmmakers, and to take ownership of the selection process through voting. This participatory model became highly influential and was later adopted by numerous children's and youth festivals worldwide. The fifth European children's film festival to emerge in in this formative decade was focused on animation, a genre traditionally maintaining a special connection with young audiences. In Poznań in Poland, about 500 kilometres north from Zlín, the National Film Festival for Children and Youth was founded in 1969 (presently called: Ale Kino! International Youth Film Festival) but traces back to events with animated films for children since 1963.

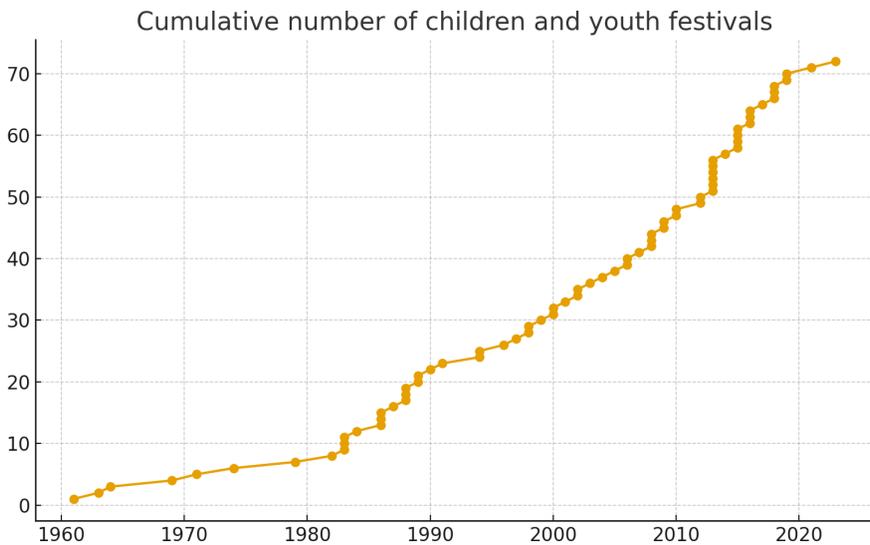
Today, the European Children's Film Association database lists around 160 film festivals with attention for children's film (European Children's Film Association, n.d.).<sup>2</sup> While the dataset is limited in its global representation, the data on European festivals seems sufficiently comprehensive<sup>3</sup> to perform indicative analyses and explore the conjecture of a contemporary burgeoning kids film festival scene. The festivals fall into three main categories: 1) festivals dedicated to children/youth; 2)

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<sup>2</sup> The European Children's Film Association website and database on festivals contained 162 individual film festivals on September 20, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> There are 143 European festival in the database on September 20, 2025 from the following countries: Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belgium, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, German, Great Britain, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Kosova, Latvia, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey and Ukraine.

festivals with a section for children/youth; and 3) festivals for films made by young filmmakers. The first group is the largest (72) followed closely by the second (66), leaving a minority position for the third category in the database. If we plot the development of the number of events in category one against time, the generated graph shows a clear upward trend, confirming that the number of festivals dedicated to children and youth has grown steadily over time.<sup>4</sup> In the 1960s and 1970s the increase is slow (<10 festivals), raising significantly in the 1980s and even more sharply in the 2010s.

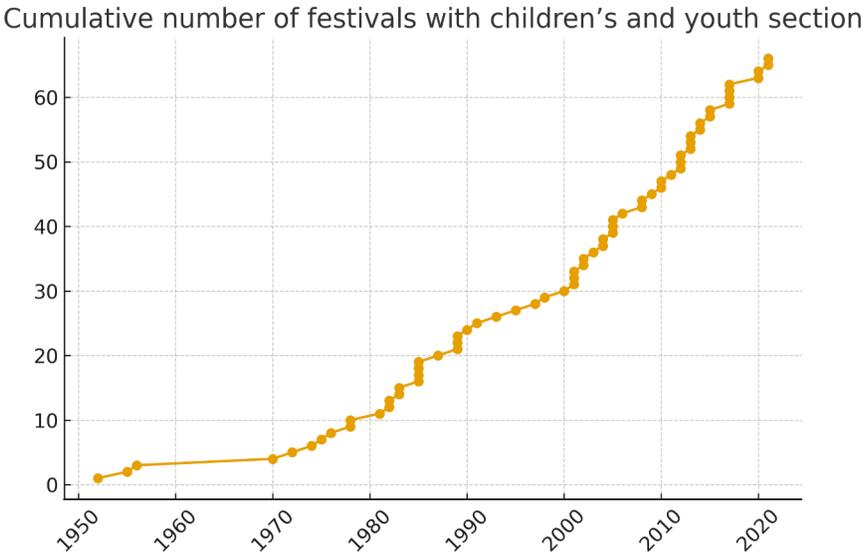


**Figure 1.** Cumulative growth in European film festivals for children and youth.  
Source: Dataset M. de Valck ©2025

The second category of ECFA festivals contains more complexities. It consists of a large number of animation and short film festivals, most of which included children's and/or youth programming in their festival since the beginning. Then there are major film festivals like the Berlinale

<sup>4</sup> For this and further analyses a new dataset has been compiled by the author with extra data, such as year of foundation, category/genre, country and city. The data from the ECFA have been transferred to the new dataset and manually completed with data found with desk research on festival websites and other online sources.

or the Edinburgh Film Festival whose involvement in children and youth programming can be traced back to specific dates – to 1978 and 1981 respectively for the Berlinale and Edinburgh – but also many major events that have turned to educational activities more recently. There are major and minor documentary events as well as a selection of otherwise themed festivals that include young people in their programming. Even though it was not possible to assert the exact beginning of a children’s or youth section or the start of educational programming for each event, an aggregation of available data points towards a similar curve as for dedicated children and youth festivals. In the 1950s-1960s less than ten festivals include attention for children and youth, this doubles to twenty in the 1980s-1990s rises to forty in the 2000s from which point onwards growth continues exponentially.



**Figure 2.** Cumulative growth in European film festivals for children and youth. Source: Dataset M. de Valck ©2025

Although the available data has its limitations, the two analyses provide a sufficiently robust empirical foundation to confirm that children’s film festivals across Europe have experienced two growth periods: one in the 1980s, that coincides with the general proliferation of film festivals at the time (De Valck 2007); and another more pronounced one since the early 21st century in particular since the 2010s, which can in-

deed be regarded as evidence for a burgeoning scene in the new millennium.

This article explores the hypothesis that the expansion of children's film events over the past two decades – whether as standalone festivals or as dedicated programs within larger events – is not merely coincidental but intrinsically linked to the European Commission's heightened focus on media literacy and education. While the proliferation of these festivals could come about organically, driven by a favourable Medienverbund, grassroots enthusiasm or artistic ambition as was the case with the festivals in Zlín and Giofanni, their timing and scale suggest a deeper connection to evolving policy priorities at the European level. I will argue that the recent rise of children's film festivals across Europe reflects a broader shift in how media and film are perceived as tools for education, resilience and cultural engagement. As digital technologies reshape how young audiences consume and interact with media, the European Union has increasingly positioned media literacy and film education as cornerstones of its cultural and educational agendas. But how exactly do these policy-frameworks intersect with the growing landscape of children's film festivals? From the formal recognition of media literacy in regulatory frameworks to the integration of film education into broader cultural strategies, the following sections will map the policy landscape that has both responded to and propelled the rise of children's film festivals in Europe.

### **Media literacy in EU policy frameworks: recognition and regulation**

The European Union's involvement in media literacy dates to the early 2000s when the term emerges in official documents, reflecting a long-standing recognition of media's vital role in fostering informed citizenship and sustaining democratic, open societies. The rapid pace and scale of digital transformation further reinforced this view, making it clear that media skills in the new millennium would require continuous updating to ensure all citizens could adapt and thrive in evolving media environments. These developments are increasingly referred to with the umbrella terms 'media literacy' and 'media education' in EU communication and documentation. Yet, in the mid 2000s it remained unclear what actions and initiatives the individual member states were taking to achieve these goals.

In 2005 and 2006 the European Parliament first calls for a European approach to media literacy (European Commission, 2007, footnote 3). A Media Literacy Expert Group is established in 2006 to analyse and define media literacy trends. More initiatives follow: in the second half of 2007, the study "Current trends and approaches to media literacy" is commissioned by the EU to the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, to obtain an overview of media literacy practices in Europe (Cervi et al 2010). The final, hefty (141 pages) report, not only offers a panorama of experiences with media literacy in Europe, but also sketches a historical perspective that positions media literacy as useful hyperonym, one that is the result of media convergence and includes both previous forms and new forms of literacy: classical literacy (reading-writing-understanding), audiovisual literacy and digital or information literacy (European Commission, 2013: 8). Recommendations include the creation of both national and European media literacy networks and support for those already in existence, networking between national and European media regulatory authorities, public awareness campaigns, opportunities for children and young people to create media, and inclusion of media literacy in the educational system and lifelong learning. Many of these recommendations will be embraced and put into practice in the years that follow.

The year 2007 marks a pivotal moment in the European Union's policy framework, as the *Audiovisual Media Services Directive* (AVMSD) introduced the concept of media literacy for the first time. The Directive emphasized media literacy as a crucial element in achieving the objectives of the European Union, recognizing that citizens must be able to access, use, understand, and critically evaluate media and its content to sustain democratic and competitive societies. It acknowledged that media use represents both an opportunity and a challenge for open democracies. Recital 37 of the *Directive 2007/65/EC* highlights this (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2007, recital 37):

'Media literacy' refers to skills, knowledge and understanding that allow consumers to use media effectively and safely. Media-literate people are able to exercise informed choices, understand the nature of content and services and take advantage of the full range of opportunities offered by new communications technologies. They are better able to protect themselves and their families from harmful or offensive material. Therefore the development of media literacy in all sec-

tions of society should be promoted and its progress followed closely.<sup>5</sup>

From this moment on, member states are legally required to develop media literacy skills in their countries and to report on their efforts every three years (*idem*, article 26).

The new legal obligation underscores the need for reliable assessment tools and raises important questions about how media literacy is defined and how the development of media literacy skills can be measured. The early studies had revealed significant variations in how stakeholders conceptualize media literacy, highlighting a lack of shared understanding. Furthermore, the implementation of media literacy practices was found to be uneven across EU member states, and a common set of indicators for evaluating progress remained absent.<sup>6</sup>

The European Commission's Media Literacy Expert Group (MLEG) is used to address this issue. It is a Commission-run expert group that brings together different categories of stakeholders with the objective to coordinate with Member States and exchange views. It aims to "identify, document and extend good practices", to "explore ...coordinating EU policies" and to "build synergies between the media literacy activities of Member States" (European Commission, 2024). The members are national authorities from the EU Member States (responsible for media literacy policies), regulators (such as audiovisual and media regulators, and sometimes media councils), civil society organisations active in media literacy, education, communication and digital literacy, media industry representatives and academics. The group helps shape a shared European perspective on media literacy, understanding it as a broad and evolving concept that adapts to ongoing changes in technology, society, culture and politics. Their main achievements are contributing to the creation

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<sup>5</sup> The second half of the recital reads: The Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 December 2006 on the protection of minors and human dignity and on the right of reply in relation to the competitiveness of the European audiovisual and on-line information services industry already contains a series of possible measures for promoting media literacy such as, for example, continuing education of teachers and trainers, specific Internet training aimed at children from a very early age, including sessions open to parents, or organisation of national campaigns aimed at citizens, involving all communications media, to provide information on using the Internet responsibly.

<sup>6</sup> The European Association for Viewers' Interest (EAVI) is given project lead for a study on assessment criteria for media literacy (European Commission: Directorate-General for the Information Society and Media et al., 2009).

of tools for mapping and measuring media literacy across Europe, providing expert input for the AVMSD revision in 2018 and fostering a networked community of practice that responds to new trends and topical themes, such as disinformation and fake news. Notably, the expert group does not have an official mandate, and for reinforcement and strengthening of the 2007 regulations, the AVMSD 2010 codified version (*European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2010*) and the 2018 revision (*European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2010/2018*) constitute important steps. In response to the revised 2018 directive, which requires Member States not only to develop but also to *promote* media literacy, the MLEG initiates the European Week of Media Literacy to help raise awareness. The week has its successful inaugural edition in 2019.

Other issues prove harder to tackle. New milestone publications in the mapping of media literacy practices and actions are published in 2014 (Hartai, 2014) and 2016 (European Commission, Directorate-General for the Information Society and Media, European Audiovisual Observatory, & Chapman, 2016). The 2014 report, funded by the EU Lifelong Learning Programme, highlights that media education in Europe takes place in both formal settings as part of the curriculum and in informal or non-formal settings outside of school. The 2016 report, prepared by the European Audiovisual Observatory (EAO), also stresses the significant role played by civil society.<sup>7</sup> However, both reports show that a decade after the 2007 study on media literacy trends in Europe, its key challenges for a cohesive European approach remain unresolved. Similar methodological challenges in the mapping process are highlighted, such as “the absence of a common evaluations framework”... “the absence of a universally accepted definition of media literacy ...” and “the absence of a common notion of what is ‘significant’”... (p. 1).

### **Prioritizing digital literacy in the Digital Education Action Plan**

As the European Union’s engagement with media literacy consolidates,

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<sup>7</sup> An good example is the European Charter for Media Literacy that was drafted by a coalition of academics, NGOs and practitioners in 2006, which identified seven key competences of media literacy and called upon educators, regulators and industry to sign and promote good media literacy practices (Bachmair & Bazalgette, 2007). Other key findings of the 2016 report include the importance of collaboration, a focus on “teens and older students” and the dominance of critical thinking – followed by media use – as primary media literacy skill addressed in the projects analysed.

the media landscape continues to transform at high speed due to technological, social and cultural developments. Societies are becoming increasingly mediated and digitised, while the range of stakeholders involved in media literacy expands. At the same time, there is both a push to broaden the concept of media literacy to be more inclusive, and a tendency to highlight certain topics or approaches as particularly “significant,” often to raise awareness and funds for specific initiatives and projects.

Examples of the first are media literacy projects targeting the elderly, the disabled or refugees; projects that aim to broaden the preoccupation with children and youth in earlier media literacy and media education initiatives. A case in point for the latter is the rise in visibility of the terms ‘digital literacy’ and ‘digital competencies,’ calling attention for the specific skills needed to use digital devices, applications and networks, and narrowing the broad scope of media literacy down to more technical and practical competencies related to digital technologies. Increasingly, concerns about disinformation, misinformation, fake news, and unsafe internet and social media are dominating debates and discourse – leading up to concerns about AI– and these are often attributed to digital media specifically. Although different in focus and scope, the terms media and digital literacy are sometimes used interchangeably in EU-policy documentation, which perpetuates the methodological challenges in research in this area and does not help resolving the matters of definitional clarity and effective media literacy indicators for EU policy.

One key difference between the EU’s involvement between media and digital literacy stands out. The surge in use of the terms digital literacy and digital competencies coincides with targeted efforts to integrate digital literacy as a core competence in education policy. According to the European Commission (2020a) in the *Digital Education Action Plan (2021-2027)* digital literacy is defined as the digital skills and competences for the digital transformation. The action plan expresses concern about (young) people’s understanding of digital information:

Digital literacy has become essential for everyday life. A sound understanding of digital information, including personal data, is vital to navigate a world increasingly infused with algorithms. Education should more actively help learners to develop the ability to critically approach, filter and assess information, notably to identify disinformation and to manage overload of information as well as develop financial literacy. Education and training institutions can help build

resilience to information overload and disinformation, which becomes more widespread in times of crisis and major societal upheaval. Countering disinformation and harmful speech through education and training is crucial for effective participation in society and democratic processes, especially by young people. More than 40% of young people consider that critical thinking, media and democracy are not 'taught sufficiently' in school. The challenge is particularly relevant for younger students, nearly all of whom are online every day (European Commission, 2020a, p. 12).

Recognizing digital literacy as a set of essential skills for democratic, resilient and economically competitive societies, the *Digital Education Action Plan* states that learners should acquire digital literacy in both formal and informal education and training systems, and concerted efforts to embed digital literacy in curricula, teacher training and teaching practice are needed.

It is important to emphasize here, that no similar European strategy is in place for integrating *media literacy in the broad sense* into education. Some Member States have their own media education plans, but on EU-level action is realized through policy obligations (such as the AVMSD), networks and alliances, and funding. In terms of education policy then, there seems to be a reversal in the hierarchy of the terms: media literacy experts become a subordinate group of stakeholders in achieving the digital literacy action plan aims. In their Communication on the Digital Education Plan, for example, the European Commission includes the Media Literacy Expert Group in one of their proposed actions:

Develop **common guidelines for teachers and educational staff to foster digital literacy and tackle disinformation through education and training**. This should be done in close cooperation with stakeholders through a multi-stakeholder group, bringing together civil society organisations, European technology companies and carriers, journalists, media and broadcasters, the Media Literacy Expert Group and the European Digital Media Observatory, national authorities, education and training institutions, Safer Internet Centres, educators, parents and young people. This will be done in line with the upcoming Media Action Plan. (2020b).

Amongst the other stakeholders included in the plan, the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO) is a newcomer, launched in 2020

to combat online disinformation, and bringing together expertise from fact checkers, media literacy experts and practitioners, researchers, media organisations and online platforms (European Digital Media Observatory n.d). It seems that the educational preference for a focus on digital literacy over media literacy goes hand in hand with increasing emphasis on protection, especially of young people.

Film literacy, much like digital literacy, is understood as a specialised subset of media literacy. It refers to the ability to critically understand, analyse and create moving images, recognizing film both as an art form and a powerful medium of communication. While film literacy focuses specifically on audiovisual content and storytelling, it is highly valued for its role in fostering critical thinking, cultural awareness and creative expression. However, unlike digital literacy, film literacy has not yet been integrated into a comprehensive European education policy plan, despite an early interest in film education.

### **Film literacy in EU-policy: building audiences for national heritage**

In 2011 the Directorate-General for Education and Culture invites proposals for a study on film literacy in Europe, covering both formal and non-formal settings and the role of the audio-visual industry in film education. The tender is won by a consortium led by the British Film Institute and headed by Mark Reid, Head of Education at BFI. The objective was not only to aggregate input from experts across Europe for an overview on film education in Europe, but also to solicit evidence-based recommendations that would inform policy making in the upcoming Creative Europe framework (BFI & European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2011). Creative Europe was established in 2014 by merging the previous Culture programme and the MEDIA programme into a single funding framework. The activities and objectives of the MEDIA programme (2007 – 2013) were continued and expanded in Creative Europe (2014 – 2020).

This connection with funding schemes to support the European audiovisual industries characterizes the European Union's initial approach to film literacy. For the European Commission, the defined purpose behind film literacy was "for young people, to provide awareness and knowledge about our film heritage and increasing interest in these films and in recent European films, the ultimate goal being to build a

long-term audience for European films" (BFI et al 2011, as quoted on p. 8). As is well known, European heritage and culture receive substantial support from Europe under the 'cultural exception' and European funding is indispensable for the competitiveness of its creative industries next to national funding and support schemes (Albornoz and Garcia 2019, Donders et al 2014, Ward 2008). The concept of national heritage and its relation to a European identity, however, are notoriously "complex and contested" (BFI et al 2011 p. 5)<sup>8</sup> and the different national film cultures with their diverging traditions, histories and ideological views are hard to align under one shared European banner (Reid 2018). In light of this, it comes as no surprise that the Screening Literacy study attests that European countries have distinct models and approaches to film education in the early 2010s. It is interesting how the report adds that support for the national film heritage is not commonly prioritized by film educators in their initiatives and practices (BFI et al 2011). However, since 80% of the funding for film education in European Member States was provided through its national and regional governments – often allocated by national film agencies (idem p. 20) – the availability of extra funding at European level provides a crucial financial impulse for film education initiatives in Europe.

With the launch of Creative Europe, the available European budget for media and film literacy increases. The MEDIA programme had already spent between 1 and 2 percent on education (Reid 2018, p. 7). Even though it focused on support for the audiovisual industries – development, distribution, and promotion / training. – some funding could be allocated to media and film education activities as part of audience development or promotion and circulation of European audiovisual works, for example through festivals. In the Creative Europe programme, film literacy for the first time receives explicit attention. The MEDIA Sub-programme of Creative Europe introduces an action dedicated to 'Film Literacy' under the priority area of audience development:

The Audience Development support scheme includes two actions:

**Film Literacy.** Support is available for projects providing mechanisms for better cooperation between film literacy initiatives in Europe with the aim to improve the efficiency and European dimension of these initiatives.

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<sup>8</sup> For an introduction to critical debates on heritage film see Vidal 2012.

**Audience Development Events.** Support is available for audience development events focusing on innovative and participatory strategies reaching out to wider, especially young, audiences with European Films (Culture & Creativity, n.d).

This new film literacy scheme funds around 30 projects in its first three calls (European School Education Platform, n.d.). What's more, the attention for film literacy extends beyond the dedicated scheme. For example, in the action for support of festivals it becomes obligatory to include audience development in applications, and initiatives aimed at young children are encouraged specifically (Culture & Creativity, n.d). Stakeholders respond positively to the new action for film literacy and education. In the mid-term evaluation of Creative Europe festivals, audiovisual events and film literacy stakeholders report a wish to prioritize "film literacy for the creation of future audiences as well as support for children's and kids' content" and ask for an increase in budget to build their capacity to reach these goals (European Commission, 2018).

From 2016 onward, the Creative Europe – MEDIA scheme begins to open up more explicitly to education institutions, marking a shift from 'Film Literacy' to 'Film Education.' This transition is formalized by renaming the action into 'Support for Film Education.'<sup>9</sup> Yet, the defined objective of the European Union does not fundamentally change in the second half of the Creative Europe programme (2014-2020). The 2016, 2017, 2018 and 2019 calls underscore that film education's primary purpose is to promote Europe's film heritage and build future audiences (European Education and Culture Executive Agency [EACEA], 2016; EACEA, 2017; EACEA, 2018; and EACEA, 2019):

Within the specific objective of promoting transnational circulation, one of the priorities of the MEDIA Sub- programme is:

- supporting audience development as a means of stimulating interest in, and improving access to audiovisual works in particular through promotion, events, film literacy and festivals.

The MEDIA Sub-programme shall provide support to:

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<sup>9</sup> A survey of available data on applications and results show that at least since 2016 – earlier data could not be retraced – the number and scale of requested grants typically exceed the available budget, indicating a strong interest in film education initiatives in the professional field.

- activities aimed at promoting film literacy and at increasing audiences' knowledge of, and interest in, European audiovisual works, including the audiovisual and cinematographic heritage, in particular among young audiences.

The reach of the Screening Literacy report, however, extends beyond its influence on the Creative Europe programme. It advocated against a singular understanding of the concept of film literacy, informed by an instrumentalist agenda of developing audiences for European cinemas, emphasizing how an understanding of film and mastering some of its language is important as a social and cultural good in and of itself. This conception of film literacy sees film education as a fundamental right for everyone, "akin to the entitlement to universal literacy" (BFI et al 2011, p. 5) and emphasizes that the aims of film education are not at odds with those of media education. Instead, they are most effective when pursued together, especially in an era of media convergence. Some points of tension in the relationship between film literacy and media literacy are pointed out, such as the tendency to consider film, firstly, as an art form and media, firstly, as a source for entertainment and information, and also the tension between protectionist and positive views on media engagement, where media literacy tends to be seen as a tool to protect people from various dangers – above all children and youngsters – and film literacy, on the other hand, is foremostly understood as an enriching skill and gateway for cultural experience and creative expression. That the exclusive focus on European film heritage in the Creative Europe programme may also be seen as protectionist, is subtly hinted at.

Bringing these considerations together, the first recommendation of the report advises to:

Draft a model of film education for Europe, including appreciation of film as an art form, critical understanding, access to national heritage, world cinema and popular film, and creative film-making skills (BFI et al 2011, p. 22).

This recommendation includes the explicit suggestion to extend the existing European Commission's definition of film literacy from critical appreciation to creative use.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The original definition of film literacy in the tender was: "the level of understanding of a film, the ability to be conscious and curious in the choice of films and the competence to critically watch a film and to analyse its content,

### **Frameworks for film education in Europe: critical thinking, creative use and cultural education**

In 2014 and 2015 a group of 25 film educators from 20 European countries collaborate to create the European Framework for Film Education. The project, again led by Mark Reid from the BFI, is conceived to address the first recommendation of the Screening Literacy report and is funded through the new Film Literacy support scheme in the MEDIA-strand of Creative Europe (2014 – 2020). The model is based on the didactical approach of defining learning goals that can be translated back into pedagogies. The group uses existing film education practices in Europe and good examples to distil a didactical model that aims to offer guidance and inspiration for future film education projects, emphasizing the need for collaboration between educators, learners and industry. Even though the framework is significantly less binding than the Digital Education Action Plan, it is not less ambitious, seeking to “consolidate a body of theory, practices and principles behind various European film education activities, to simplify and make it coherent, in pursuit of an overarching aim: to inspire and equip people across Europe to be able to enjoy, understand, create, explore and share film in all its forms throughout their lives” (British Film Institute, 2015).

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cinematography and technical aspects.’ (BFI et al 2011, p. 8).

<b>FILM EDUCATION FRAMEWORK FOR EUROPE</b>						
<b>AIM</b>	To inspire and equip people across Europe to be able to access, enjoy, understand, create, explore, and share film in all its forms throughout their lives					
<b>FILM SENSIBILITY</b>						
<b>KEY DIMENSIONS OF FILM EDUCATION</b>	<b>CREATIVE</b> Processes   Practices   Participation		<b>CRITICAL</b> Processes   Practices   Participation		<b>CULTURAL</b> Processes   Practices   Participation	
<b>AREAS OF LEARNING</b>	Specificities of film	Social, personal and collaborative processes	Critical personal response	Wider film engagement	Historic and Institutional context	Reflective learning
<b>LEARNING OUTCOMES</b>	Critical thinkers	Adventurous creators	Expressive individuals	Sensitive contributors	Reflective practitioners	Active collaborators
	Confident explorers	Informed participants	Discerning audiences	Enthusiastic advocates	Independent learners	Engaged citizens
<b>EXPERIENCES</b>	Engage with film in all its forms Experience creative opportunities in film making		Experience film in the cinema Reflect on national and world cultures	Discover film from the past	Experience the art of film Identify, question and reflect on ideas and values	
<b>DISPOSITION FOR LIFELONG LEARNING</b>	<b>CURIOSITY</b>	<b>EMPATHY</b>	<b>ASPIRATION</b>	<b>TOLERANCE</b>	<b>ENJOYMENT</b>	
<b>CONNECTING TO LIFE AND WORK</b>	<b>PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT</b>		<b>CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY</b>		<b>EMPLOYABILITY</b>	

**Figure 3.** Film Education Framework for Europe (British Film Institute, 2015, p. 7).

*The Framework for Film Education* is clustered conceptually about three key dimensions, called the three Cs. The critical dimension refers to the ability to understand film, to reflect on how it develops its form and arguments, and to question how film affects its audiences. The creative dimension then develops a culture of filmmaking from the viewpoint that creative use of film and critical understanding of film reinforce each other. Thirdly, the cultural dimension covers how film contributes to one’s understanding of themselves and others, of cultural and national identities, of history and heritage, and of ideas and values. Together these three dimensions represent a conceptual understanding of film literacy and education that emanates from a positive outlook on people’s engagement with film, whereby a developed sensibility of film fosters their curiosity, empathy, aspiration, tolerance and enjoyment, all acknowledged as important dispositions for life-long learning.

In 2019-2020, Creative Europe funds another follow-up project: Film Education: From Framework to Impact, led by a consortium of the BFI, Danish Film Institute (DFI) and Vision Kino (Germany) and the Cinémathèque Française. The project “aimed to devise a practical approach to film education that can be used across Europe” (Danish Film Institute, n.d.). It included creation of a MOOC and website – *Film Education – A User’s Guide* – that provided educators with resources and tools to design and deliver high quality film education in a variety of formal and non-formal settings (Film Education Framework, n.d.). The resources and training material are designed for use in schools and preschools as well as at festivals, libraries, cinemas and film institutes. One of the objectives was to share and distribute expertise across Europe, “from most to least experienced practitioners, agencies and countries” (Film Education Framework, 2021, p. 3). To this end, four regional seminars are organized with countries in the Baltics, east and west Balkans, eastern Mediterranean and Visgrad, to build know-how in regions where film education is under-resourced, and with the aim of training lead practitioners that could deliver further cascade training. Due to the pandemic, two of these are postponed and moved online, enabling more practitioners to participate in the seminars. Moreover, expertise is invited from global partners and 43% of the participants in the MOOC were from outside Europe, which addressed the wish to situate European approaches to film education in the global context.

The three European funded projects - *Screening Literacy*, *Framework for Film Education* and *From Framework to Impact* – may not have led to a systematically integrated EU education policy for film literacy; together they did succeed in stimulating collaboration among European film educators working in different settings and encouraging exchange of best practices between educators, learners and industry across countries. The Film Literacy Advisory Group – a loose and open network of experts across countries and sectors that was formed for the Screening Literacy tender – continues to play a key role in shaping policies on national, regional and international level and advocating for film education as a core component of media literacy.

## **Film festivals and film education**

Film festivals represent a notable gap in the existing body of literacy research. While the *Framework for Film Education* includes a section ad-

dressing film societies, film clubs, and film programs for children and young people—offering case studies of certain festivals—these examples are neither comprehensive nor representative of the broader landscape. For instance, the Zlín Film Festival is conspicuously absent from the section dedicated to the Czech Republic. Furthermore, a review of the *Film Education Journal* (established in 2018) reveals that no articles published to date include the term “festival” in their titles, keywords, or abstracts. Similarly, *The Journal of Media Literacy Education* (founded in 2009) does not feature any articles with “festival” in the title, subject, or abstract. Although Reid (2018) mentions film festivals amongst the cultural spaces that offer non-formal film education outside school and several reports have emphasized the significance of civil society for media literacy practices across Europe (Hartai, 2014; European Commission et al 2016), little sustained attention has been devoted to mapping or exploring the intersection of film festivals and film education specifically.

Are film festivals undergoing an educational turn, I asked at the beginning of the article, and if so, how might this turn be explained? My discussion of the European policy landscape has demonstrated that film literacy and film education are embedded within the broader, interdisciplinary field of media literacy. Although the European Commission has long acknowledged the important role of media in sustaining democratic societies, targeted policy and regulatory interest in media literacy and education arose in the 2000s, fuelled by concerns and hopes about the digital transformation and internet. Since 2007, European Member States have been required to report on their progress in developing media literacy skills. A variety of organizational units, advisory bodies, and initiatives, each with specific roles and responsibilities – such as Directorate-Generals (DGs), observatories, expert groups and NGOs like the European Association for Viewers’ Interest (EAVII) – contributed to advancing media literacy policies and practices across the European Commission, the European Union and its Member States. However, the lack of unity in approach, definition and evaluation of media literacy constituted persistent challenges. The subsequent specialization into areas like film literacy and digital literacy can be seen as a natural evolution, reflecting both the breadth of the original concept and the influence of stakeholder interests and agendas. The momentum for media literacy ultimately deepened within the specific domain of film education, making audience engagement a mandatory component of festival funding applications, with a particular emphasis on young children. Although a

detailed exploration is beyond the scope of this article, it is reasonable to assume that the attention and support for film education at the European level have influenced national and federal policies, subsidies and regulatory frameworks for film festivals and promoted film education at film festivals. Combined, these factors represent a significant catalyst for the educational turn in film festivals during the 21st century.

Examining the policies and frameworks for film literacy and film education in Europe through studies, calls and EC communications, moreover, is insightful regarding the ontological question of what 'film education' at festivals might mean, raised at the beginning of this article. Unlike digital literacy, film literacy and education are not addressed in a dedicated European action plan for education. Instead, these topics have been integrated in policy for the audiovisual industries and promoted through MEDIA and Creative Europe funding schemes. As a result, the interpretation of film education was influenced by the European policy agenda for preserving European audiovisual industries through promotion of cultural diversity. Reflecting the European Union's commitment to the cultural exception in trade foreign policy (Bohas 2022), the concept of film literacy was originally employed to foster young people's understanding and appreciation of Europe's cinematic heritage. Its aim was not only to raise awareness of classic and contemporary European films but also to cultivate a sustainable audience for European cinema over time (BFI et al 2011, p. 8). Here, the various commissioned studies on media literacy and film literacy practices in Europe reveal a stark contrast between the position of the European Commission and literacy stakeholders in civil society. Media literacy stakeholders, such as film educators, audiovisual events and film festivals adhere to a much broader interpretation of film education than the instrumentalist definition that aims to secure future audiences for European films.

The Framework for Film Education builds on the expertise and practices of film and media literacy stakeholders in Europe, among which film festivals. Its three Cs – the critical, creative and cultural dimensions – are emphatically not limited to children and young people, but equally suitable for all learning situations. As such, it is not difficult to see how the framework can be used to advocate for an "educational" understanding of film festivals in general, drawing attention to the ways in which they can "inspire and equip people across Europe to be able to access, enjoy, understand, create, explore, and share film in all its forms

throughout their lives" (British Film Institute, 2015, p. 7). However, given the educational turn in film festivals and the increasing number of events dedicated to curating film programs for children and young people, I expect that examining the historical and contemporary practices of film education for young audiences at these festivals will yield significant new insights into the educational dimensions of curation, programming, and audience engagement. My hypothesis is that the work of these film festivals has contributed to a flourishing professional media literacy practice that, with a positive approach to film, embraces the full breadth of this art form and its cultural and creative expressions in order to shape young people critically, creatively and culturally. As such, film education may be the best antidote to the perceived threats of disinformation, fake news and other digital dangers because it provides avenues for engaging with media not only as consumers but also as informed, reflective, and active participants in the cultural and digital landscape.

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