Between *Polderen* and Programming: A Teaching Report of the EUFA Project at Utrecht University

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From the moment I was approached by my colleague Marijke de Valck (via Skadi Loist) in April 2016 to join this special programme, I was very enthusiastic about the initiative, yet we also knew that there would be some constraints in terms of scheduling. We had just launched our new MA programme and the curriculum was already more than full, with students taking three mandatory classes simultaneously over a period of ten weeks. As such, the EUFA project was never going to be a compulsory part of the curriculum. Instead, we told our students this would be a great "after school activity", where not only would they be able to see new films well before they would go into general release, but also discuss them, rank them, and eventually vote on them as part of a much larger festival setting. Of course the cherry on top was the opportunity for one of the students to be sent as a delegate to partake in the final voting procedure. On the basis of this "sales pitch", twelve (out of thirty-eight students) signed up for the screenings, which took place once a week on Wednesday between 5 and 8 p.m.

Given that the screenings took place after regular teaching hours and that they were not explicitly part of the curriculum, I deemed it important to provide context within our MA programme. In the period of the screening of the five EUFA films, I teach a class called Programming and Curating. This course aims to highlight current debates and practices of programming for (film) festivals. The textbook for this class, Marijke de Valck, Brendan Kredell and Skadi Loist's *Film Festivals: History, Theory, Method, Practice*, provided the necessary context in terms of film festival selection practices. Moreover, the notion of the film festival as part of larger cultural network, fostering a certain taste and societal relevance proved to be productive in relation to the particularities of the European University Film Award.

The Wednesday night screenings were followed by a fairly freeform discussion, mostly facilitated by myself (occasionally one of my colleagues). I think students actually learned mostly how to engage and sustain a meaningful discussion, where all participants were equal and every opinion mattered. Usually the conversation would start with some quick, first thoughts on the film. As the facilitator, my job was to not let these hasty verdicts on a given film, sometimes no more than expressions of boredom or unease, dominate the ensuing discussion. Initially, discussions tended to focus on issues of aesthetics, for instance the persistent use of the long take, the absence of diegetic music, or the "naturalistic" acting. Since our students are neither trained in nor taught on film form or aesthetics at MA level, these types of discussions, valuable as they were, often led to somewhat unsatisfying results for everyone involved, simply because not all participants were equally aware of the presence or absence of certain formal elements.

As the screenings progressed, I noticed a significant change in the students' evaluation of the films: rather than judging every film individually, they actively sought to uncover recurring dominant themes and read and evaluate the films in relation to one another. The topic of "Europe" was of course crucial in the thematic discussions. This became even more pronounced when we were coming towards the end of our screenings and the moment of voting for the top three films for Hamburg was imminent. Often students would bring up the

representation of Europe and Europeans and the extent to which the five films were somehow representative of the many troubling, challenging and exciting aspects of the notion of Europe, living in Europe or feeling a sense of belonging in Europe. I think this was one of the most striking topics of discussion instigated by the EUFA film selection. My students—as far as I was concerned, or as far as I had experienced until then—do not seem to be particularly interested or engaged in the idea of a (some sort of) European identity. Contrary to my own experience when I was a student twenty years ago, "Europe" as a larger cultural construct or category of belonging does not seem to hold my students' interest or imagination. Rarely do we address issues from a distinct European perspective; it seems to be an element of our identity that goes without saying. Watching and extensively discussing five films that were somehow chosen on the basis of their "Europeanness" forced my students to come to terms with and think through their notions of what it means to be European, to identify as such or, in some cases, not to identify as such.

Figure 10: Student deliberations at Körber Stiftung, Hamburg, 2016 EUFA edition. Photo: EUFA/K. Brunnhofer.

At the end of the series of screenings, I asked two students to write a report on the EUFA experience, as a way to bring the EUFA initiative to the attention of a larger group of people. They wrote a concise, yet very enthusiastic report of the screenings and the voting procedure, which was published in the faculty and university-wide digital newsletter (UU Nieuws en Agenda). In this report, they emphasised the aspect of discussion, of becoming able to actually listen to someone else's opinion as the most valuable learning experience they got out of their involvement. Dutch students tend to be quite adept at the performance of discussion, and always seem to reach a (somewhat) common ground, meaning all participants feel their opinion was heard and taken into consideration. There is a Dutch verb for this kind of consensus decision-making: *polderen*, derived from the concept of the polder model used

in economic and social policy making, which, according to *Wikipedia*, is often understood as "a pragmatic recognition of pluriformity" and "cooperation despite differences".

The challenge presented by the EUFA discussions was that, apart from having a meaningful exchange on these films, eventually the films had to be ranked. In the act of ranking, the philosophy and act of *polderen* no longer hold any ground and this is where things got complicated.

The group had decided early on that an in-class voting procedure would be held after the final screening. The idea was to make the process as open and transparent as possible. The students ranked the films by giving them one, two, three, or zero points, effectively submitting the top three. I did not partake in the voting, but I was responsible for tallying the results and facilitating the discussion as the results came in after each round. After the first round of voting, it turned out that *I, Daniel Blake* (Ken Loach, 2016) was by far the favourite of the group and that *Toni Erdmann* (Maren Ade, 2016) received only one point. Discussion ensued over whether *I, Daniel Blake*'s popularity might have something to do with the fact that it happened to be the last film we watched (I think we rightly assumed this may have had some influence on the voting behaviour). On the basis of this first round of voting, *Toni Erdmann* was out of competition, which caused discussion among some students who felt that this result did not do justice to the obvious merits of the film. The students agreed on revote of the first round, now that the potential impact of the top-three system was obvious. In the end, it took at least six more rounds of voting to arrive at our top three: *I, Daniel Blake*, *Graduation* (*Bacalaureat*, Cristian Mungiu, 2016), and *Fire at Sea* (*Fuocoammare*, Gianfranco Rosi, 2016), the latter ultimately becoming the number one choice. Voting for the top three was partly an exercise in reaching consensus, yet it also taught the students the lesson that in these kinds of activities eventually the majority vote is decisive. For a small number of students this was a tough pill to swallow, as some of their favourite films were consistently ranked low. Nevertheless, a consensus was reached and the resulting top three were deemed a proper reflection of what the students from Utrecht University valued most in the EUFA selection of films: thematic resonance, artistic merit and social relevance. It was now up to our democratically elected student representative Jasper to go and represent the top three films in Hamburg to the best of his abilities.

Overall, I was very pleased with the opportunity the EUFA project gave us to discuss contemporary European films with a dedicated group of students. As mentioned, our university's scheduling unfortunately will not allow for this initiative to become a structural part of the curriculum. Nevertheless, I think it is a valuable supplement to our programme, in that it not only facilitates a sustained discussion on film and Europe, but also gives students a hands-on experience of the work involved in programming and selecting films in a festival context.

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Playing a Film Festival Jury: Cooperative Competition in the Classroom

Andrea Pocsik

Introduction

New research agendas in the field of film studies involve innovative methodologies in higher education. An example is the initiative of the European Film Academy and Filmfest Hamburg that mobilised the Film Festival Research Network, proving again how beneficial networking can be. We, European Network for Cinema and Media Studies (NECS) members, especially those of us who are active teachers, all share the problem of bringing theory and practice together; yet, we have little opportunity to find solutions together and of learning from each other. The core question "How to teach European cinema?" raises crucial questions concerning our cultural identity, our profession as teachers and academics and our subject: film studies. In spite of globalisation, contemporary European cinema produces many images that feed on old traditional values, but it is a real challenge (and, I am convinced, an important task for engaged film scholars) to show and teach such images while avoiding reinforcing Eurocentric views.

In this paper, I argue that EUFA is a treasury of methodological opportunities since it can generate classroom activities that connect theory and practice. In my contribution, I will try to demonstrate how cooperative competition (or, to use a neologism, "coopetition"), originating in game theories and widely used in the business sphere, can be applied to this project and what benefits it can bring. I intend to show how it deepens our knowledge about contemporary film production and distribution, how it develops students' skills in project work, where they practice coopetition in order to be nominated as the representative of their university, and how it educates emancipated students by extending their right of selection and judgement of highly valued products of European cinema.

Teaching European cinema

The theoretical assumptions of Benedict Anderson about nation are adapted by several theoreticians in the field of European studies so that we can think about Europe as an "imagined community", with what probably is more a desired (and promoted by European Union integration policies) than an actual cohesive, common identity. Recent economical, political and social crises all over the continent, but especially the reactions and possible solutions to them, have questioned the reality of the basic democratic laws of this large, diverse community of shared interests and values. Furthermore, belonging is a rather passionate relationship and, just as in the case of nationalism, European identity has recently been exploited by populist politicians and has become a debated (utopian) idea rather than a descriptive term for something existing. Even so, Europe has to be defended and surrounded by fences, some of them believe.

Film is the memory and imaginary of the twentieth century, as Thomas Elsaesser argues; cultural traditions and reminiscences of past events were first saved on celluloid and other analogue media and then in new digital formats. Obviously, most research focuses on the products of this complex machinery but learning about audiences, those millions who bought tickets to watch these films, and understanding why they liked or disliked them and

what sort of communities they created in the process is not equally known. In the introduction to their volume *Film–Cinema–Spectator: Film Reception* (Schenk, Tröhler, and Zimmermann)*,* the editors try to map relevant fields of film studies to remedy this lack. They start from reception studies and continue with New Film History and New Cinema History, both of which stress the importance of the cultural history of film and cinema, using new methodologies (oral history and cultural studies methods). But this is the historiography of the social and aesthetic practice of film reception. To understand the present situation (and make the work of future film scholars easier) the new field of film festival studies undoubtedly constitutes a big step forward in the scholarship.

In their contribution to the first volume of the *Film Festival Yearbook*, Marijke de Valck and Skadi Loist provided an overview "of this burgeoning field". They constructed six axes to approach it: film as work of art; economic continuum; festival as institution; reception: audiences and exhibition; politics of place; the film festival circuit; and history. They also provided a thematic, annotated bibliography that further defined the picture, and which they updated in the *Film Festival Yearbook 2* (Loist and de Valck).[1] A couple of years later, a volume of the same series examined programming, the topic that is closer to our project (Ruoff).

The EUFA project with this serious awarding game (which I will describe in detail later) created an (interpretational) framework that made possible to add a second question to the main one (how to teach European cinema?): how to teach film festival studies?

Working Process (Film Analysis) Based on Politics and Poetics

Our case, the Pázmány EUFA Lab in Budapest, was somewhat special in terms of the methodology since it was based (as all distance learning) on a mixture of online and physical presence. I was on a DAAD scholarship of the German Academic Exchange Service, for which I spent half of the term in Berlin, so we used e-mail consultations, created a Facebook group, uploaded and shared, liked and commented. It was an extra-curricular activity, which I prefer because it provides a component of fun to the work, thus increasing student motivation, although it is more difficult to make demands of them, due to the lack of credits. The students were selected on the basis of motivation letters they wrote, and worked in teams. I gave each team a film to discuss and asked them to sum up the films' features and the results of their analysis (cooperation). In our lab work we listened to student analyses, commented on them, and provided counterarguments. In order to stress the importance of a cultural studies approach I created a so-called "label cloud" involving terms referring to formal and historical aspects of film (e.g. direct cinema tradition, docu-realistic approach, French new wave style, new Romanian film) and sociocultural themes (e.g. anticommercialism, criticism of neocapitalism, bureaucracy, corruption, refugees). Students had to pair labels with each film and explain their choices. In the next workshop we analysed the establishing shots of the films and discussed how they prepare the audience for what they are going to see. The closing activity was the most exciting: we nominated the top three films using the official evaluation sheet and I summarised the result. For the best film each student had to vote individually and prepare an argument to defend their choice in the form of a short vlog (3–5 minutes long). After having watched all vlogs, students had to nominate the representative of the Pázmány EUFA Lab who would go to Hamburg (competition). Based on the votes and their performance in the lab we selected Kristóf Sági to attend the EUFA workshop and award ceremony.
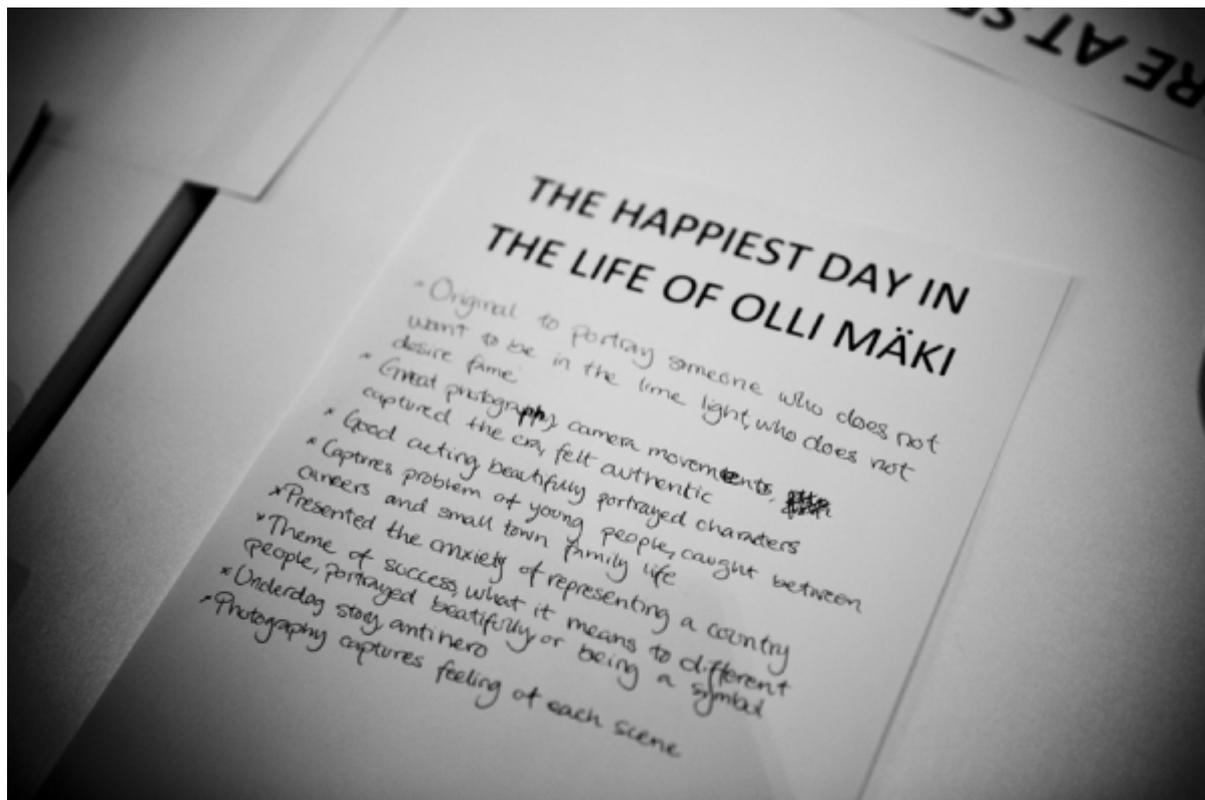
Figure 11: Film analysis: student notes at the 2016 EUFA edition in Hamburg.
Photo: EUFA/K. Brunnhofer.

Award-Giving Game: Simulation of a Film Festival Jury

This brief overview of the project shows how I understand the concept of "emancipated students" and why I think these initiatives are crucial to develop a film studies teaching methodology in higher education. First of all, during the simulation of a film festival jury students use their theoretical (film historical and analytical) knowledge actively towards a certain and well-definable goal: the award. It gives them the opportunity to discuss why and how a film is evaluated in comparison with other films (that is, why the process differs from review writing, which is also an important ingredient of a film studies curriculum). Selecting a film means considering its "politics and poetics"—how the film's chosen topic and form represent our social, political and cultural environment in Europe—and estimating what effect it will have on the audience. Incidentally, since this is an international project, comparing the criteria and judgements of the universities of these very different regions would be a fascinating research topic. Also, we should deepen students' knowledge of programming and film festival studies for several purposes, and first of all to lend a theoretical depth to this very practical project work—but knowledge that is based on the experiences of festival organising tasks.

If we take a closer look at the five films we had to analyse in the first year of EUFA, we might agree they all raise awareness of social issues, but students have to learn to express the consciousness of this fact in order to learn how to develop the audiences' sensitivity and openness toward socially engaged art forms. This is also a form of "resilience techniques" that should (and can) teach us to make a better world—to put it very simply.[2]

To sum up, in my personal teaching philosophy I would highlight one issue here that originally comes from Immanuel Wallerstein's essay on the question whether there is such a thing as a world culture: universities should be "permanent places for cultural resistance" (198). EUFA offers one opportunity to practice this resistance. I believe its methodology should be further developed by drawing on its network of universities and on the very different infrastructure, academic environments and experiences of the diverse European identities that compose it.

Notes

[1] The annotated bibliography has since been frequently updated and is available online on the website of the Film Festival Research Network (www.filmfestivalresearch.org).

[2] In EUFA 2017, this experience gained even more importance. One of the four features and also the documentary film were related to the complex social phenomenon of refugees. Coincidently, *The War Show* (Obaidah Zytoon and Andreas Dalsgraad, 2016) revealed the origin of conflicts and followed the subsequent tragic events in Syria through the camera of eyewitnesses. In *The Other Side of Hope* (*Toivon tuolla puolen*, 2017) Aki Kaurimsäki, a Finnish director of the older generation who has represented European cinema, takes a satiric, critical look at the possible integration of refugees through the odd encounter of a Syrian refugee and a Finnish citizen. The analysis of these two films became a challenge in a social, political environment where anti-migration propaganda dominates public speech.

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Suggested Citation

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