



Report on Young Audience Award

Project: Reviving, Boosting, Optimising and Transforming European Film Competitiveness - REBOOT

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Description	<p>Analysis of young people's film preferences in Europe: The case study of the Young Audience Award (months 3-6). Leading partner: JYU (2 PM).</p> <p>The European Film Academy has awarded Young Audience Awards to European films since 2012. The awarded films are annually selected by 12-14-year-old audiences across Europe among three films pre-selected by the Academy. The European Film Academy includes over 4000 filmmakers from European countries working in close contact with various core institutions and organisations in the EFI. This case study explores how the European Film Academy seeks to build future competitiveness of the EFI by engaging young people as audiences of European cinema. The focus of the case study is the preferences of the 12-14-year-old cinema audiences in Europe through the analysis of the Young Audience Awards. Methods: Desktop analysis</p>



	of the organisation and aims of the Young Audience Awards; analysis of the style and content of the awarded films.
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Tables

Table 1. Summary of the YAA nominees.

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Table 2. Total admissions of the award-winning films.

60



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1. INTRODUCTION

The REBOOT project explores the competitiveness of the European film industry by providing research-based knowledge and strategic and tactical suggestions for action to optimize the potential of young people in Europe, understood both as emerging audiences of European cinema and citizens of future European societies. The REBOOT project combines several overlapping dimensions, connecting diverse actors and stakeholders in the European film industry at various levels, from local to global, both in Europe and beyond. The key ambitions of the project are:

- a) increasing support for young people's engagement with European film;
- b) strengthening the place of the EU in the global audiovisual economy, particularly in light of the rise of video on demand (VOD);
- c) supporting cultural diversity in the EU film industry;
- d) addressing the need for a different understanding of competitiveness and relevant indicators in this context; and
- e) recognising and supporting the importance for the EU of film and, more broadly, of the cultural and creative sector as a geopolitical asset. (REBOOT, 2023, p. 3)

This report draws on REBOOT's Work Package 5, which focuses on building the future competitiveness of the European film industry by exploring young people's film preferences and consumption habits as well as their limitations. The report is the first research-based deliverable in the project, and it deals with several of the five key ambitions, such as young people's engagement, cultural diversity, and the role of the EU in supporting the competitiveness of the European film industry. The report is based on a case study of the Young Audience Award (YAA), coordinated by the European Film Academy. The European Film Academy represents over 4,500 filmmakers from European countries working in close contact with various core institutions and organizations in the



European film industry. The Academy has awarded YAAs to European films since 2012. The awarded films are annually selected by 12–14-year-old audiences across Europe from three films preselected by film experts. Both the Academy and the YAA are supported by the European Commission through its Creative Europe programme. The case study enables the exploration of both young people's and film experts' notions of good youth films and the examination of the role of such an award in the competitiveness of the European film industry.

The aim of the case study is to explore how the European Film Academy seeks to build the future competitiveness of the European film industry by engaging young people as audiences of European cinema and to analyse the preferences of 12–14-year-old cinema audiences in Europe through the YAA. To meet these aims, we plan to conduct desktop analysis of the organization and aims of the YAA and by analysis of the content and style of the awarded films (REBOOT, 2023, p. 32).

This report will start with a brief introduction to the YAA and its nomination and voting practices, followed by a discussion of prizes as the European Film Academy's and the EU's tools to promote the European film industry. After this contextualization, the report introduces the data and methods used in the case study. This section is followed by a literature review of research on young people and cinema, and the genres of children's film, teen film, and youth film. The analysis section focuses on films that received the YAA between 2012 and 2022 by summarizing their key contents and production information and discussing their recurring themes and stylistic features. The concluding section draws together the main findings, discusses the results in the context of previous research, and brings out the limitations of the study. Finally, the report proposes suggestions on how the YAA could be utilized better to promote the European film industry and its future competitiveness.

2. CONTEXT OF THE CASE STUDY



2.1 What is the Young Audience Award?

The YAA is a category of the European Film Awards, which are both organized by the European Film Academy, based in Berlin, and its production company, the European Film Academy Productions, with the support of Mitteldeutsche Medienförderung (the regional film funding institution for the German federal states of Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt, and Thuringia, based in Leipzig, Germany) and the European Union with its MEDIA strand in the Creative Europe programme. The European Film Academy was founded in 1989 by Ingmar Bergman and 40 other European filmmakers to advance the interests of the European film industry (European Film Academy, 2023). Besides the European Film Awards and the YAA, the European Film Academy collaborates with the European Parliament in awarding the LUX Audience Award.

The YAA was established in 2012 and has been awarded every year since. Young people aged 12–14 from 42 countries in Europe, Israel, Palestine, and Australia, form the juries that choose the winner from among the three nominated films. In 2022, over 3,000 jury members voted for their favourite film as part of the awarding process. The number of countries and cities involved has increased over the years. For example, in 2017, just 31 countries participated in the awarding process (Young Audience Award, n.d. a). The juries watch the films either in cinemas or online in uncommercial screenings organized by the European Film Academy's national partners. The partners include film festivals, national film centres, film agencies, film institutes, and film educational organizations. In 2022, 76 organizations were involved in the process (for the awarding process see Young Audience Award, n.d. b).

There have been major changes in the process of selecting the three nominated films. Each year, 40–60 films are submitted to the YAA competition. In 2012–2018, the three nominees were directly chosen by five film experts, such as film directors, producers, and festival directors, without a preselection stage (email correspondence with Heidi Frankl, European Film Academy Productions,



6 June 2023; Young Audience Award, n.d. b). This practice changed in 2019. In 2019–2021, five experts preselected 6–8 films for the next stage of the competition. In this stage, a small jury of young people watched the preselected 6–8 films and chose the three nominees for the YAA.

In 2020, the European Film Academy started to develop a European Film Club as a platform linking the YAA jury members and film and cinema professionals (email correspondence with Heidi Frankl, European Film Academy Productions, 23 March and 13 April 2023). In 2022, for the first time a group of young people of the Consultation Group of the European Film Club participated in the preselection of eight films together with the experts (email correspondence with Heidi Frankl, European Film Academy Productions, 23 March and 6 June 2023). In 2022, the combined preselection committee consisted of the following persons: Joana Domingues (Academy Board member, producer, Portugal), Andrey Hadjivasilev (producer and director, Bulgaria), Faridah Nabaggala (representative of European Children’s Film Association, festival director and author, Norway), Stavros Pamballis (artistic director, Cyprus), Claudia Schmid (festival director, Switzerland), and a group of teenagers, of whom only the first names are revealed: Hena, Madara, Maria Beatriz, and Myrto (Young Audience Award, n.d. a). After this, a small jury consisting of five 13–14-year-old former participants in the YAA awarding process chose the three nominees. Their first names and countries are revealed: Aifric from Ireland, Natalija from Montenegro, Tin from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Christina from Greenland, and Riana from Kosovo (Young Audience Award, n.d. a).

In the final stage, the young audiences around Europe form a broad awarding jury that watch the three nominated films and vote anonymously. The awarding jury members must watch all three films. They not only vote for their favourite film but also rank all three films. The YAA awarding ceremony takes place in Erfurt, Germany, and online in November.



Certain eligibility criteria apply to both the filmmaker and the film to be included in the YAA process. The award can be given to a European film whose director was born in Europe and holds a European passport. The main production country must be European. Europe is defined here as a geographical area including both EU and non-EU countries. The criteria include a few countries beyond Europe's geographical borders, namely Israel, Palestine, and Australia. There are additional criteria for a *European film* explained by the European Film Academy (2022a) as follows:

The criteria whereby a film qualifies as European are based upon the Council of Europe Convention on Cinematographic Co-production (CETS No. 220). According to the Convention, a film qualifies as European if it achieves 16 points out of a possible maximum of 21 from a schedule of European elements. To give the most flexible definition, the European Film Academy uses a lower minimum of 13 points.

These European elements include:

European elements and the maximum weighting points of each element: director (4), scriptwriter (3), composer (1), first role (3), second role (2), third role (1), head of department – cinematography (1), head of department – sound (1), head of department – picture editing (1), head of department – production or costume design (1), studio or shooting location (1), visual effects (VFX) or computer generated imagery (CGI) location (1), post production location (1); altogether 21 points. (CofE, 2017)

Films eligible for the YAA competition must be full-length fiction, animation, or documentary films that are intended for release in cinemas and that address an audience between 12 and 14 years of age. The films must have had their premiere within the year leading up to the YAA ceremony. Moreover, they must fulfil at least one of the following criteria: each film must have been selected for at least two major festivals; or awarded at least at one major festival; or released in cinemas in



at least two countries or sold for such release (European Film Academy, 2022a; email correspondence with Heidi Frankl, European Film Academy Productions, 6 June 2023).

Since 2017, the European Film Academy has provided educational materials about the three finalists for the young jury members and their teachers. There have been some changes to the materials each year, but usually they start with providing basic information and a synopsis of each film, followed by a note about potential triggers, an introduction to the film's themes, and questions to facilitate discussion. The materials contain general instructions for the teachers and the viewers, stating, for example, that in addition to the content, "cinematic techniques" are important when judging a film's quality. Moreover, the materials provide tips to start the discussion and keep it going when fatigue sets in. It is also emphasized that "young people should all have an equal chance to see a film without prejudice and any pedagogical influence and to form their own (first) opinions" (European Film Academy, 2018, p. 3). This sentence has been added as a reminder to the teachers not to intervene too much in the discussion. It is also noted that the discussion points provided in the materials do not need to be followed strictly and that the themes that the young people bring up should determine the course of the discussion. The foreword to the 2020 handout states: "The main thing is to find your own favourite and to be able to explain to others why you have made this particular choice" (European Film Academy, 2020, p. 2). In some of the handouts, the thematic introductions are extensive and thorough. If the materials are used, it is likely that their introductions will steer the discussion in the guided direction. Thus, the YAA process combines different aims which can even be seen as somewhat contradictory. On the one hand, the awarding process is a competition in which the young audiences should independently make their decision. On the other hand, the process includes pedagogical veins seeking to support the reception of the films and discussions of their contents.



2.2 Prizes as tools to promote the European film industry

Cultural prizes, labels, awards, and other distinctions are tools for creating and governing cultural meanings that may have social, political, and economic implications. The YAA can be identified as such a tool, but its further utilization is still in its infancy. Yet, the European Film Academy has ambitious plans to develop the award in the near future. In this sub-section, we discuss the logic of cultural prizes, such as the YAA, as tools for promoting the European film industry and the YAA's potential for strengthening this industry's competitiveness. Moreover, we discuss the relationship between the YAA and EU cultural policy, including its measures for supporting European cinema.

The European Film Awards and the YAA as its sub-category are part of a broader trend of impacting on the field of culture and other areas of society by making cultural distinctions and creating cultural value through prizes. The practice of awarding artistic and cultural creations with prizes has a long history dating back to antiquity. During the past decades, the practice has progressively increased, reflecting the capitalist logic of value formation in contemporary societies. English (2008, pp. 2–3) has described this logic as follows:

The rise of prizes over the past century, and especially their feverish proliferation in recent decades is widely seen as one of the more glaring symptoms of a consumer run rampant, a society that can conceive of artistic achievement only in terms of stardom and success, and that is fast replacing a rich and varied cultural world with a shallow and homogeneous McCulture based on the model of network TV.

Such a pessimistic view of the impact of cultural prizes certainly contradicts the aims of various prize-givers and the awarding criteria of diverse cultural prizes that seek to combat cultural homogenization or standardization by celebrating diversity, difference, and uniqueness. Despite such aims, cultural prizes may implicitly guide the entrants to create cultural products that are 'up to date', 'topical', and 'timely', so entries may resemble each other. Lähdesmäki (2014, pp. 493–494,



see also Lähdesmäki et al., 2021, pp. 82–82) has noted how similar cultural contents are repeated at the EU-awarded European Capitals of Culture and how their “local” cultural events may be difficult to distinguish.

The trend of prize proliferation has impacted on the film sector in Europe and beyond. Today, almost all European countries have national film awards. Moreover, film prizes are awarded at the transregional level (such as the Nordic Council Film Prize), the European level (such as the European Film Awards and the YAA), and the EU level (such as the LUX Audience Award) (see, e.g., English, 2008; Baschiera & Di Chiara, 2018; Stjernholm, 2016). Moreover, during the past decades, there has been a boom in local, national, and international film events and festivals that seek to attract visitors and gain visibility through awarding prizes in various categories (e.g., Iordanova, 2015; Wong, 2011). While the YAA focuses on European films suitable for young people, there are also several prizes awarded to European children’s films, such as European Children’s Film Association (ECFA) Award chosen by film experts since 2010 (see ECFA, n.d. a).

Awarding cultural prizes, labels, and other distinctions can be seen as a form of cultural governance. Foret and Calligaro (2019) refer to such use of power as “governance by prizes.” They distinguish two modes of such governance based on whether the prize is awarded ex-post or ex-ante for the achievement. Ex-post prizes aim at honouring the achievement and thus arousing admiration and triggering emulation, while ex-ante prizes draw on a competition for monetary incentives or material resources that support the realization of the proposed achievement. Foret and Calligaro (2019, p. 1136) name the first mode as “governing by praise” and the latter as “governing with a price.” In practice, though, these modes of governance overlap. Both modes draw on the following logic:

First, prizes are a resource of political domination to mark the centrality and authority of the prize-giver, the exemplarity of the recipient and the legitimacy of the cause and values that are honoured. Second, prizes work as a technique of government to create incentives, to mobilize civil society, private interests and individuals and to invite them to compliance. Third,



prizes are public policy tools for the construction and the solving of social problems. (Foret & Calligaro, 2019, p. 1337)

The YAA is a typical ex-post prize that aims at “praising” European youth films that are considered good both by European film experts and the young people themselves. The awarding practice simultaneously underlines the competence of the creators of the awarded films and the European Film Academy and its expert network as organizers of the prize. The award has the potential to increase awareness and visibility not only of the awarded films but also of the Academy and its activities, aims, values, and expertise. The YAA emphasizes youth films as an important genre and youth as a significant audience segment. The YAA’s participatory voting practice has the potential to promote the European film industry to future cinemagoers in Europe. The YAA does not include any explicit social agenda unless its focus on youth is interpreted as such. However, the awarded films commonly deal with various social issues and societal challenges, as our analysis in this report shows.

“Governance by prizes” is typically about “governance at a distance” – particularly if the prizes motivate people to try to achieve them, or even compete for them, and thus make people transform and adapt their actions, responding better to the awarding criteria (Foret & Calligaro, 2019; see also Vos, 2019). Since the YAA’s submission criteria only consider the films’ European dimension and the awarding criteria draw on their popularity among youth audiences, the prize does not explicitly govern the contents or production processes of European youth films.

Cultural prizes rarely include a major monetary reward. Instead, they usually draw on another kind of economic logic. A central dimension of governance by prizes is branding. Cultural prizes are brands that are wanted to be received, or in many cases even competed for, since receiving a prize – a brand – is beneficial for their receivers. Brands are based on a promise of added value: they may bring about public recognition, visibility, specificity, meanings, and contexts that are beneficial for their owners since such added value can be turned into an economic value (Lähdesmäki,



forthcoming). In the case of the YAA, the added value for both the nominated and awarded films draws on their promotional activities in the countries that participate in the voting process. Moreover, VOD information and pedagogical material about the films are available on the website of the European Film Academy. Such activities may increase the public recognition and visibility of the films, particularly if the film producers and marketing agents utilize the awarding process efficiently. Previous research has shown how film literacy education may not only promote the reception and consumption of European arthouse cinema but also increase its social and economic impact through extended audiences (Mitric, 2022).

Our study indicates, however, that the YAA films are poorly accessible: the awarded films have not been broadly shown in cinemas or are not commonly available through transactional video on demand (TVOD) platforms in EU countries. For instance, the Lumiere database provides admission information from less than ten European countries for half of the awarded films and from more than ten countries only for one film, namely *Goodbye Berlin* (admission data from 15 countries) (Lumiere VOD, 2023). It is difficult to find the awarded films on diverse TVOD platforms, and many of the films lack transcription into the most common European languages. For example, only 12 of the 33 nominated films were available for viewing through TVOD platforms in Finland when writing this report. The challenges of accessibility depend on funding. Until 2019, the European Film Academy received European funding to include YAA films on several TVOD platforms. In the following year (and during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic), the Academy started to develop the European Film Club as a platform that seeks to make European films more easily accessible and link together the YAA jury members and national film-related organizations, such as film festivals, institutes, and educational actors (email correspondence with Heidi Frankl, European Film Academy Productions, 23 March and 13 April 2023). Such measures are welcome since the European Film Academy's current promotion programme for the YAA films can be considered modest. Further promotion measures are left to the producers of the films.



Publicity is central to brands that get their power from the movement between different forms of capital. Several scholars (Baschiera & Di Chiara, 2018; English, 2005, 2008; Lähdesmäki, forthcoming; Stjernholm, 2016) have explored the functioning of cultural prizes by utilizing Pierre Bourdieu's notion of capital and noted how prizes enable "the transformation from one kind of capital to another, as they constitute an institutional network where transactions between cultural, symbolic and economic capital are negotiated" (Baschiera & Di Chiara 2018, p. 239). Moreover, prizes enable the awardees to gain social capital, i.e., a strengthened social position and status in a social network, that can be turned into economic capital (Lähdesmäki, forthcoming). English (2005, 2008) has referred to the logic of awarding cultural prizes as the "economics of cultural prestige" in which cultural, symbolic, and social dimensions of capital are interwoven and that cannot be understood without the money economy. Publicity enables the transformation of capital and is, hence, a prerequisite for the functioning of any ex-post prizes. It is also pivotal in the awarding process since it displays the prize-givers' authority at work (Foret & Calligaro, 2019).

The value of the YAA as a cultural brand draws on its European dimension and the broad international selection process, including the key audience segment of the films – young people. The utility of the European dimension in cultural brands, though, depends on the image and credibility of the prize-giver – in the case of the YAA, the European Film Academy. Research on cultural prizes suggests slightly contradictory results on the utility of the European dimension. On the one hand, the research on several cultural distinctions and labels awarded by the EU shows how the awarded cultural actors see the value of such European-level brands as higher and more significant than the brands at the national, regional, or local levels. European-level brands, such as the European Capital of Culture and European Heritage Label, are perceived as evidence of European-wide importance, quality, and exclusivity and as scaling up the meanings and importance of awarded cultural actors, events, and sites (Lähdesmäki et al., 2020; Lähdesmäki et al., 2021; Lähdesmäki, forthcoming). On the other hand, scholars have noted how the EU's "logic of symbolic



production (...) remains secondary to member states in the definition of hierarchies of honours and values” (Foret & Calligaro, 2019, p. 1337). This contradiction may draw on the differences in the brand value of the European-level, and particularly EU-related, awards. Some of them are (still) rather modest brands, while others are more established, broadly recognized, competed for, and utilized for diverse cultural, social, and economic purposes. Moreover, the connection of the prize to the EU may not only evolve positive associations. For instance, Jäckel (2015) and Baschiera and Di Chiara (2018) suggest that the connection to the EU in the case of the European Parliament’s LUX Prize has not necessarily branded the awarded films within the film sector. This concern draws on the political agenda of the prize-giver and the political and social emphasis in the awarding criteria that can be perceived to be at odds with the artistic quality fostered within the sector.

Even though the EU has not yet managed to create broadly recognized film-related brands to support the competitiveness of the European film industry, many European film festivals and their prize categories function in this way. The best-known festivals, such as Cannes, Berlin, or Venice, are brands that can be used to market and create value for films shown and awarded in them. These festivals and their prizes may also impact audiences’ notions of what European cinema is.

The YAA is linked through funding to the EU’s activities in the audiovisual sector. The European Film Academy receives funding from the European Commission’s Creative Europe programme and its MEDIA strand. Respectively, the Academy’s awards – the European Film Awards and the YAA – are run by sponsor funding and monetary support from various sources, including the MEDIA strand. Moreover, the EU has its own film award, the LUX Prize, which was transformed into the LUX Audience Award in 2020. Since then, it has been organized jointly by the European Parliament and the European Film Academy, in partnership with the European Commission and Europa Cinemas. All these prizes show the variety of policy instruments through which the EU seeks to promote the European film industry.



Several scholars have explored the role of cinema in EU cultural policy and the policy instruments through which the EU impacts and regulates the sector (e.g., Herold, 2004, 2007, 2018; Irion & Valcke, 2015; Jäckel, 2005; Sarikakis, 2007; Stjernholm, 2016). Their studies commonly underline the EU's interest in European cinema both as an economic asset and as an identity political instrument. Such interests include various contradictory aims. As Herold (2004, p. 3) noted nearly two decades ago: "the audiovisual policy at the EU level is characterized by a contradiction between the economic logic of market integration and the goal of preservation of cultural diversity." The EU seeks to make the European film industry more competitive with the US film industry and to increase the markets for European films both in Europe and beyond. Moreover, the EU seeks to foster cultural and linguistic diversity in Europe and European cultural identities in European films.

Bruno De Witte (forthcoming) divides the EU cultural policy instruments into three strands: cultural choices included in the regulation of market policies; culture-focused broad funding programmes based on competitive funding for bottom-up short-term cultural projects; and continuous emblematic cultural events based on a top-down policy that promotes the idea of Europe. Such emblematic cultural events include a cultural rationale aiming to highlight the European dimension of culture and to create and strengthen the idea of a European cultural area where cultural actors collaborate and cultural products are consumed transnationally (Lähdesmäki, forthcoming). Moreover, such emblematic events typically include more specific social goals, such as emphasizing EU values, European identity, belonging to Europe, the celebration of diversity, or promoting human rights.

The Creative Europe programme with its MEDIA strand is an example of the EU's support for the European film industry operating through applied funding. Running the European Film Awards and the YAA is one of many activities funded by the strand, whereas emblematic cultural events include the EU's cultural awards, prizes, or distinctions that the EU and its cultural partners co-run annually. The LUX Audience Award is one of these prizes. Other EU cultural prizes focus on architecture (the EU Prize for Contemporary Architecture), literature (the EU Prize for Literature), cultural heritage



(the European Heritage Awards), and music (the Music Moves Europe Talent Award). The EU has delegated the awarding processes of these cultural prizes to European expert networks and associations that are active in the fields in question. Since these prizes do not include or include only small financial rewards, their usability is in their expected brand value (Lähdesmäki, forthcoming). For instance, the LUX Audience Prize does not include any direct grant, but the prize provides subtitles in the 24 official EU languages for the top three films in the competition. The winning film receives further support in the form of adaptations for the visually and hearing impaired. Such investment in the accessibility of the films means generous economic input from the EU aimed at helping the film to find a distributor in different European countries (Baschiera & Di Chiara, 2018; Stjernholm, 2016).

The brand logic functions, at its best, reciprocally. In the case of the EU's emblematic cultural events, the EU brands the participants and the awardees, and the participants and awardees brand the EU (Lähdesmäki, forthcoming; see also Stjernholm, 2016). According to the criteria and guidelines of such events, the awarded cultural actors are expected to foster cultural diversity and shared cultural features in Europe as well as promote the visibility of the EU as a supporter of its local and regional cultural actors' activities and collaboration. At the same time, the cultural actors create (or the EU institutions use the emblematic cultural events to create) a more human and cultural image for the Union.

The YAA includes the potential for a dual branding function, though this potential could be better utilized. The films may benefit from being nominated and awarded in a process organized and managed by a European-level network of film experts if the filmmakers and producers seize the opportunity. Respectively, high-quality films that receive public attention and positive media recognition may brand the prize-giver, the European Film Academy, if the Academy is included in this publicity. The prerequisite for any brand is, however, wide visibility. Without access to YAA films, such visibility is difficult to achieve.



3. DATA AND METHODS

Our data consists of the 11 YAA winning films; the web pages of the European Film Academy and the Young Audience Award; the educational materials about the films available on the YAA web page; the social media platforms of the YAA (Facebook and Instagram); an online meeting between the representatives of the REBOOT project and the European Film Academy, and email interviews with a representative of the European Film Academy. Some of the films were viewed through TVOD platforms or streaming services. For some, viewing links were acquired through production and distribution companies.

First, desk research was carried out to gather information about the YAA, the European Film Academy, and the role of cultural prizes in the EU's activities in promoting the European film industry. The desk research included a review of literature on children and young people as cinema audiences and the genres of children's film and youth film. The literature review offered reference material for exploring the YAA films as films about young people and as youth films and for analysing the recurring themes and narrative strategies in them. The analysis of the films was a combination of inductive qualitative analysis and theory-driven exploration.

Second, thematic analysis was used to analyse the 11 YAA winning films. Thematic analysis "is a method for developing, analysing and interpreting patterns across a qualitative dataset, which involves systematic processes of data coding to develop themes – themes are your ultimate analytic purpose" (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 4). The analysis proceeded broadly through the following phases of reflexive thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2022, pp. 34–37):

1. Familiarizing with the dataset, that is, watching the films, reviewing parts of them, taking notes on the films, and developing analytic ideas.
2. Working through the films, identifying meanings, and applying descriptions (coding).



3. Generating initial themes and identifying shared meanings across the films.
4. Developing and reviewing the themes, discarding some and collapsing some together, and drafting the analysis.
5. Refining and naming the themes.
6. Writing up the analysis.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW ON YOUNG PEOPLE AND CINEMA

Scholarship on young people and cinema has focused on three primary areas: the effects of cinema (and later of media more broadly) on the young, representations of youth in cinema, and the youth as consumers of cinema. Most scholarly attention has been given to the negative and positive effects of cinema on young people. Such “effects studies” were long characterized by moral and medical anxieties. Recently, the emphasis has shifted from protecting the young from the corrupting effects of media to teaching them how to become critical media users – that is to say, to media literacy (Hermansson & Zepernick, 2019, pp. 15–17). According to Timothy Shary and Alexandra Seibel scholarship on the representation of young people in cinema only began in the 1980s with a focus on US films, and the emphasis of the scholarship has been on US cinema ever since. As Shary and Seibel point out, the first English-language edited volume on young people in international cinema was their own *Youth Culture in Global Cinema* (Driscoll, 2011, p. 149; Shary & Seibel, 2007, pp. 2–3). Other edited volumes that deal with young people in global and European cinema are *Where the Boys Are: Cinemas of Masculinity and Youth* (Pomerance & Gateward, 2005) and *Screening Youth: Contemporary French and Francophone Cinema* (Chareyron & Viennot, 2019). Recent extensive edited volumes to deal with children’s film are *The Palgrave Handbook of Children’s Film and Television* (Hermansson & Zepernick, 2019), which focuses mostly on the analysis of media texts



produced in the twenty-first century and *The Oxford Handbook of Children's Film* (Brown, 2022). The last two focus on children while the two previous emphasize youth.

Research on European youth as cinemagoers and on young people's conceptions of cinema began only in the late 1990s (Soto-Sanfiel et al., 2021, p. 121). This is not surprising, because academic research on the identity and meanings of European cinema started to develop only in the early 1990s (Soto-Sanfiel et al., 2018a, p. 206). The research on European cinema has focused on the films of individual filmmakers, particularly of auteurs with a distinctive cinematic style, and on the cinema of certain countries and regions, such as the Nordic countries or Eastern Europe. During the last few decades, the focus of this research has shifted to transnational trends and histories.

Research on young cinemagoers is still in its infancy, as most of the research has concentrated on more general media use by young people. Soto-Sanfiel et al. have noted (2018b, p. 716) that despite the EU's dedication to promoting European cinema and film literacy to create new audiences, there is little academic research that explores young Europeans' conceptions about and attitudes toward cinema, specifically European cinema. By exploring the YAA in this report, we contribute to this strand of research.

Next, we discuss briefly the recent studies exploring the relationship between youth and cinema and the previous research on children's film and youth film in the context of genre studies. Such research often makes further distinctions between younger and older children, between children and youth, between children and teenagers, and respective film categories. Although there are some differences between, for example, children's and youth film, in practice these terms often overlap. In this report, we do not make strict distinctions between them. The terms we mainly use are children's film and youth film. The fact that film rating systems, or suitability ratings (a form of censorship intended to protect children and young people) vary from country to country reflects the messiness of these categories (see for example Brown, 2017, pp. 6–7).



4.1 Research on youth and cinema

The most relevant study with respect to this report is the film literacy project conducted by María T. Soto-Sanfiel, Isabel Villegas-Simón, and Ariadna Angulo-Brunet. This project was funded by the EU's Creative Europe programme (2014–2020) from its MEDIA strand (Support for Audience Development; Film Literacy). The cross-cultural study aimed to understand European young people's relation to cinema. The participants were 937 secondary school students from eight European countries: Croatia, England, France, Germany, Iceland, Italy, Romania, and Spain. The researchers asked young people, aged 13–19, about their thoughts regarding cinema and cinemagoing in general and, more specifically, about European cinema. Moreover, a smaller-scale film literacy sub-project was conducted with students from five of the eight countries. The educational sub-project aimed to increase film literacy and positive attitudes towards European cinema. The students who took part in the project voluntarily watched five European drama films during the five-month long educational project (Soto-Sanfiel et al., 2018a, 2018b, 2019, 2021). The results of this project will be discussed in more detail in the forthcoming REBOOT report D5.1, which focuses on young people's cinema preferences.

Soto-Sanfiel, Villegas-Simón, and Angulo-Brunet's results suggest that for young people, European cinema cannot compete with US cinema. The young people perceived differences between European and US cinema and preferred the latter (Soto-Sanfiel et al., 2018, p. 732, 2021, p. 130, 136). The participants in the study had a stereotypical image of European cinema and considered it more intellectual, artistic, and boring than US cinema (Soto-Sanfiel et al., 2018, 2021, p. 170). Moreover, they considered European cinema to be of lower quality (Soto-Sanfiel et al., 2018, p. 737). Other characteristics attributed to European cinema were that it was “less exaggerated, spectacular and commercial than cinema of other traditions” and it was thought to “contain less fantasy” (Soto-Sanfiel et al., 2018, p. 732). The film literacy project revealed that there was no significant change in the students' attitudes before and after the project, but the researchers note



that this may be partly because they watched films from only one genre, drama (Soto-Sanfiel et al., 2018, p. 206).

Soto-Sanfiel, Villegas-Simón, and Angulo-Brunet note that for the EU cinema education serves as a means to increase audiences' interest in European cinema and to improve its competitiveness. The researchers also think that cinema literacy projects are a potential counter to the dominance of the United States in the film industry (Soto-Sanfiel et al., 2018, p. 189). In his study of the Danish film literacy project *Med Skolen i Biografen/School Cinema* involving European arthouse films, Petar Mitric (2022) notes that film education can increase the economic impact of European arthouse films. Films that may be otherwise hard to access get extra visibility, and the screenings directly profit cinemas and distributors (Mitric, 2022). However, only a third of the youth participants in his study rated the European arthouse films positively, while most of the participants found the films and their stories “boring,” “strange,” “confusing,” “too realistic,” “difficult to follow,” “too much like school” and simply “not their cup of tea” (Mitric, 2022, p. 12).

As for future research, Soto-Sanfiel, Villegas-Simón, and Angulo-Brunet (2018, p. 206) suggest that scholars should explore in more detail what young people mean by European cinema, or, in other words, how they define it. Also, the genres favoured by young audiences and their definitions of those genres as well as their viewing practices (whether they like to watch films alone, with family, or with friends) are among the aspect of youth cinema culture that should be further explored. These questions shall be discussed in detail in the forthcoming REBOOT report D5.1, drawing from a survey directed at young people aged 12–24.

4.2 Children's film as a genre

Children's films are in many ways still an under-researched area, although many case studies focusing on individual countries and studios, particularly Disney, have been published (Brown, 2017, p. 1; Römpötti & Karlstedt, 2021, p. 31). Research on children's films has focused on production



strategies, ideologies, stereotypical representations, and the reception of children's films. Recently, new perspectives and the cinemas of several countries and continents have been taken up in research. One reason for researchers' limited interest in children's films during the past two decades may be the fact that other forms of cultural consumption, particularly social media and games, have become more popular than cinema among young people. Another reason may be the difficulty of defining the genre of children's film, which is increasingly marketed as family film (on the lack of interest in children's films, see Brown, 2017, p. 2; Röpötti & Karlstedt, 2021, pp. 31–33). However, judging by the recent publication of extensive literature on children's films it seems that interest in children's cinema and children's relationship with cinema is growing. As Brown (2017, p. 2) argues, it is nevertheless important to define children's film, and the definition must start by making a distinction between films made for children (for children's consumption) and films about children, i.e., representations of children in films that have been produced primarily for adult audiences. Not all films with children in them are meant for child audiences, and not all of them are appropriate for children.

According to Brown (2017), it makes no sense to categorize films based on who watches them because, in principle, anyone can watch any film, and this applies to children too. Children's films cannot thus be defined as films watched by children because adults, especially the children's parents, form a large part of their audience. Instead, it is useful to define children's film as a film produced for an intended audience, which consists primarily of children. Some researchers specify children as those aged 12 or younger (Brown, 2017, pp. 3–4). Children's film is the only genre whose definition is based on its intended audience.

Brown refers to genre theorists Rick Altman (2003) and Steve Neale (2000), who have noted that genre definitions must be based on both textual and contextual factors. The latter include publicity, promotion, and reception (Brown, 2017, p. 5). Brown (2017, pp. 5–10) lists these external factors as follows: 1. marketing and distribution strategies; 2. censorship and suitability ratings; 3. critical



reception; 4. merchandising; and 5. exhibition strategies. About the textual traits of children's films, Brown (2017, p. 11) concludes that children's cinema "must possess a set of textual and associative significations that differentiates it from cinema intended primarily for adult audiences. In very simple terms, this is why most people – not just children – know children's films when they see them."

Brown (2017, pp. 13–15) proposes five broad characteristics of children's films, which are useful for analysing the films discussed in this report: 1. the reaffirmation of family, kinship, and community; 2. the foregrounding of child, adolescent, and teenage figures and their experiences, plus "symbolic children" (animals, animated figures, child-like adults, aliens, etc.); 3. the exclusion and/or eventual defeat of disruptive social elements (restoration of order); 4. the minimization of "adult" representational elements (only a limited amount of nudity, sex, violence, profanity, criminality, suffering, sustained pessimism, drug abuse, gore); and 5. predominantly upbeat, emotionally uplifting, and morally unambiguous endings that support social status quo (still an unpleasant or undesirable outcome may be acknowledged). Brown points out that children's films are a product of the adult world ("an invention of adult society"), and therefore they reflect what adults think that children ought to watch. The conventions listed above are more visible in films targeted at younger children. In teen films, they are less visible. For Brown, teen films are a grey area and even antithetical to children's films, and they may be closer to adults' dramas (Brown 2017, pp. 15–16).

We conclude that it is fruitful to define children's films as films that have been produced with a young audience in mind, that are thus suitable for children, and that deal with children's experiences. Because such films can take the form of any genre, we treat children's film as a broad upper category, a master-genre, which is an ahistorical and non-thematic category, unlike genres that change according to socio-historical contexts (Brown, 2017, pp. 17–19).

It has been noted that during the last two decades, the category of children's films has become more blurred. Children's films have started to address difficult and sensitive themes and have become more complex narratively and aesthetically. One indication of this is that filmmakers are more



interested in making family films intended for both children and adults for economic reasons (Brown, 2017; Kümmerling-Meibauer, 2013, p. 39). According to Brown (2017, p. 17), the two categories mainly overlap, but there are some differences, for example, family films are less explicitly moralistic or educational. The increased complexity of children's films means, according to Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer (2013, p. 39), that the producers of children's films have started to take this kind of film and its audiences seriously. As we will discuss below, this can be seen in the awarded films.

The YAA juries consist of 12–14-year-olds. Most of the YAA films are clearly made for such teen or pre-teen audiences because they deal with young people's lives and young people appear in all of them as main characters. In some of the films, younger children's capacities and tastes have been considered in the contents, narratives, and cinematic styles. Because of this variety, it can be argued that the genres of children's film, teen film, and youth film are equally relevant for the analysis of the nominated films.

4.3 Teen film and youth film as a genre

A genre close to children's film is teen film. Although teen films are intended for teenagers, for young people roughly between ages 13 and 19, and this is reflected in the films' content, the genre categories overlap. Just like children's film, it is an umbrella term under which various sub-genres and styles fit (Driscoll, 2011, p. 135). Still, as Driscoll (2011, p. 65) notes, some components are typical of teen films: "So teen film requires adolescents, but it is very likely to include high school, parents, popular music, peer groups, and sexual or romantic interest. It will often include fewer central components like drug use, virginity, parties, dances, or makeovers." Driscoll's description refers first to US teen films, whose influence can be seen in films targeted at young people all over the world.



A core theme for teen films is coming of age, the process of maturing, which typically involves various obstacles. Growing up leads young people into conflict with their environment, for example, when they fail to meet the adults' expectations or intentionally challenge them. Growing up is often seen in films as a period of dramatic transformation involving rites of passage that, in contemporary European societies, are more often symbolic than literal. Examples of the latter are bar mitzvah and circumcision, both of which appear in the films that we shall analyse below. As Driscoll says, a rite may also be characterized as an "experience of limits," a life transforming experience. The person who goes through such a liminal experience is no longer a child but not yet an adult either, and therefore does not have a clear role in society. Driscoll (2011, p. 112) adds: "this no-place is also a utopia (literally 'no-place'), a fantasy of freedom and possibility based on the contradictions of the present."

Driscoll (2011, p. 149) has noted that most scholarship on teen films focuses "overwhelmingly on US teen films with (...) rare invocations of strange differences or parallels in other countries." She points out that because the term has connotations of US films and tropes like high school and prom, some researchers have chosen to use the term youth film. This can be seen as a tactical choice. They have done so to broaden the scope of research to cover youth cinema of the rest of the world, in which the commodified youth culture familiar from Hollywood films does not necessarily figure so strongly. Adopting the term youth film can also be seen to signify serious attention to films that deal with youth (Driscoll, 2011, pp. 1–2, 150). In fact, this is the term preferred in many of those studies that focus on other than US cinema (see, for example, Chareyron & Viennot, 2019).

Chareyron and Viennot (2019, p. 5) argue that in America, making films about youth for youth "gave way to a highly codified universe with emblematic characters and well-lineated plot developments." According to them, there is no equivalent to such film production in Europe, particularly not in the French film industry. They argue that French films about youth are more authentic, freed of the clichés typical of the teen film genre, and that the narratives do not follow a preconceived idea of



youth and coming of age. In a sense, the stories are unpredictable and different, like youth is (Chareyron & Viennot 2019, pp. 5–7). Edney (2019), in contrast, notes that some of the French youth films, in fact, have many similarities to Hollywood teen films. She also notes that it is not easy to distinguish films that are about and for youth from films that are less clearly intended for youth.

One difference is that the latter attract more critical attention and are successful at film festivals.

To mix things up even more, in some recent research, the term children's film is used to cover all films made for young audiences, from young infants to young adults. In our analysis below, we will use mainly the term youth film but also children's film to make distinctions when needed.

5. ANALYSIS OF THE AWARDED FILMS

5.1 Content descriptions

Next, we give short introductions to the 11 films that have won the YAA, starting with the 2012 winner.

5.1.1 The Winner of 2012: *Kauwboy*

The winner of the first YAA was the Dutch film *Kauwboy* (2012), director Boudewijn Koole's debut feature film. *Kauwboy* is a realistic drama about the difficult situation in the life of 10-year-old Jojo (Rick Lens) and his father (Loek Peters). Jojo spends a lot of time alone at home while the father is working. One day he finds a baby jackdaw and takes it home. The bird's company consoles him, but the father is strictly against having it in the house, so Jojo must hide it. The father scolds Jojo and is irritable, especially when Jojo mentions the absent mother. The father even slaps him, so Jojo must be constantly on the alert. Sometimes Jojo is seen talking to the mother on the telephone. He explains to the bird that his mother plays in a band.

Kauwboy portrays everyday life in a documentary fashion. Very little is explained, and there is only a loose plot. Only near the end is it revealed that the mother is dead, and the viewer starts to



understand the reasons behind the father's mood swings. *Kauwboy* is about the difficulty of dealing with loss and sorrow and about coming to terms with these emotions. The story is narrated through Jojo, who tries to connect with his father, who mostly ignores him. The jackdaw's death is a turning point in the narrative. It helps the father and son deal with the mother's death and find each other again.

The dynamic style of narration reflects Jojo's lively character. The boy is constantly on the go, and the handheld camera emphasizes his energy. The tension between Jojo's vitality and the paralysing situation at home creates a melancholy atmosphere. Freeze frames are used a few times to condense the narrative and heighten the intensity of the events from Jojo's viewpoint.

Kauwboy is a film for all audiences. The child's perspective does not make it less relevant for an adult viewer. With its ambiguity, *Kauwboy* resembles European arthouse cinema and some realistic social dramas, such as Ken Loach's *Kes* (Great Britain, 1969). The film's style and the hardships *Kauwboy* portrays recall Loach's working-class story about a boy and a kestrel. Both are non-sentimental portrayals of troubled children.

5.1.2 The Winner of 2013: *The Zigzag Kid*

In 2013, the winner of the YAA was again Dutch, the adventure film *The Zigzag Kid* (*Nono, het zigzag kind*, 2012), directed by Vincent Bal. It is an adaptation of the novel of the same name by David Grossman. The original literary story takes place in Israel, but the film's setting is moved to the Netherlands and France. The film has high production values, and it is designed to entertain the whole family. Behind its colourful surface, it also deals with sensitive issues such as mental health problems and suicide.

The 13-year-old protagonist, Nono (Thomas Simon), has a knack for getting into trouble. He is drawn into an incredible adventure while travelling on the train to his uncle's. This life-changing adventure familiarizes him with the past of his father and now dead mother. He also meets his extraordinary



grandparents, a master thief (Burghart Klaußner) and a glamorous nightclub singer (Isabella Rossellini). Moreover, he gets to play an investigator in the footsteps of his father. In this story too, the father has not been able to come to terms with difficult past events. He has kept important events, most of all his wife's suicide, secret from his son. The film ends with Nono's bar mitzvah, which his now extended family celebrates together. The adventure helps him get to know himself too. In the end, Nono understands better why he constantly needs to find something exciting to do and why he gets so easily into trouble. The answer is, he is like his mother.

The plot is full of twists and turns, excitement, and suspense calculated to appeal to the younger section of the youth audience. In the fantasy sequences, for instance, Nono is transported to the past to witness how his father met his mother, the mysterious Zohara. The story takes place in a colourful and nostalgic 1960s.

5.1.3 The Winner of 2014: *Regret!*

Regret! (2013), directed by Dave Schram, is an excruciating drama about school bullying and its worst consequences. This Dutch film won the YAA in 2014. This was the third year in a row that a Dutch film won. Jochem (Stefan Collier) has been a victim of cruel bullying for a long time. The reason for the bullying seems to be that he is slightly overweight and not as sporty as some of his classmates. The film opens with a classic sports class scene in which Jochem is the last one chosen for a team. The film goes on to show the many different forms that bullying can take: laughing, calling names, exclusion, blackmailing, pushing, forcing to drink alcohol, and beating.

When Jochem cannot take the bullying anymore, he commits suicide, and the whole school is horrified, although they all knew how he was bullied. Without moralizing, the film manages to teach a lesson by showing how people allow bullying to continue without intervening. The film's approach is very straightforward, but it does not show the suicide. Except for the emotional speech given by Joachim's only real friend David (Robin Boisevain) in the end, the film is very unsentimental.



David is sympathetic towards Jochem but does not dare do anything. A girl from the same class befriends Jochem, but instead of helping him, she says that he should not allow the bullying to continue. Jochem's parents are aware of the situation and see the marks of violence on his face. Yet, they obey when Jochem forbids them to contact the principal. The bullying just goes on and on, taking on more cruel forms, and Jochem is left to deal with it alone.

Regret! condemns bullying but does not demonize the bullies. It suggests reasons for their actions and shows some of the bullies regretting what they did. The main bully is a girl who has to take care of her disabled father. The one who should have acted more responsibly is the class mentor, who just ignores the bullying and tries to be friends with the pupils.

5.1.4 The Winner of 2015: *The Invisible Boy*

The action-packed Italian adventure film *The Invisible Boy* (2014), directed by Gabriele Salvatores, won the YAA in 2015. Its protagonist is 13-year-old Michele (Ludovico Girardello), an ordinary-seeming boy, who is bullied at school for no apparent reason. After yet another bullying experience, Michele realizes that he has become invisible. Invisibility gives him a chance to get back at his bullies but also to approach the girl he likes. But this is only a start, as a bigger mission is waiting for him. Michele's schoolmates have started to disappear, and then he witnesses the kidnapping of the girl he likes. Moreover, a mysterious man approaches him, explaining that his real parents were victims of a nuclear disaster in Russia. Radiation had given them superpowers, and a predatory paramilitary group wanted to exploit them to form an invincible army. Now, the same group is after Michele and his classmates, but Michele realizes that he can help his friends.

What starts as an everyday drama turns into an action film with dystopian elements. The focus is on action, and besides bullying, serious societal themes, such as the threat of pollution and war, loom within this imaginative story. Moreover, the film deals with the question of adoption, and even a romantic subplot is included. There are so many themes that the film can barely contain them all.



This is another YAA film in which the past haunts the present, and a young person needs to know the past to get to know oneself. The film had a sequel, *The Invisible Boy: Second Generation* (2018), which may have provided answers to some of the questions that remain unanswered in the first film.

The Invisible Boy can perhaps be seen as a moderate example of the merging of teen film with “the high-concept blockbuster,” in which it is no longer a question of just personal growth as the story takes on more epic proportions as young heroes fight for a better world (Nelson, 2017).

5.1.5 The Winner of 2016: *Miss Impossible*

The winner of 2016 was the French film *Miss Impossible* (*Jamais contente*, 2016), a drama about a temperamental 13-year-old, Aurore (Lena Magnien), directed by Emilie Deleuze. Aurore gets constantly into conflict with her family and friends. Because of problems at school, she must repeat a class. She feels that her parents love her academically successful sisters more than they love her, and as a result, she feels like an outsider in the family. She overhears her parents discussing how difficult she is and that she should be sent to boarding school. She is supported by her grandmother and a sympathetic teacher who manages to arouse her interest in literature.

The film does not give any explanation for Aurore’s restlessness, her inability to control herself, or her nasty way of talking to her mother. She may have some issues, but on the other hand, she is a typical, impulsive teenager who has a lot on her mind. At the dinner table, she blurts out questions such as “what if I am frigid?” and “was I sexually molested as a child?” She dreams about boys and has been going out with one, but at the same time, she has mixed thoughts about her sexual identity.

The narrative follows Aurore in her slightly dull everyday life, which gets more exciting when she is asked to sing in a band. Even this does not go smoothly, and she gets into conflict with the band members, who are 3–4 years older. In the end, she proves to be an excellent singer and has the chance to show her talent to her parents when the band plays at her mother’s birthday party. The film ends with the band’s performance. Aurore looks angelic in a white dress, her parents smile, and



everything is okay. Except for the ending, which feels a little forced and reminds one of US teen films, *Miss Impossible* is a realistic drama. Aurore is not a particularly likeable character, but she feels real.

5.1.6 The Winner of 2017: *Goodbye Berlin*

In 2017, the prize went to the German film *Goodbye Berlin* (*Tschick*, 2016), a drama-comedy directed by award-winning director Fatih Akin. The story about the 14-year-old boys' road trip is based on the young adult novel *Tschick* (2010) by Wolfgang Herrndorf.

Life is not easy for Maik (Tristan Göbel). He is an outsider in his class, his mother is an alcoholic, and his father is having an affair. The girl of his dreams ignores him. Then another outcast, a Russian German Tschick (Anand Batbileg Chuluunbaatar), joins his class. There seems to be no-one to set limits for Tschick, who does what he wants. Maik first hates him but says yes when Tschick invites him on a road trip to Walachia, Romania. They drive a stolen Lada through the hinterlands, meet eccentric people, and commit some petty crimes like stealing fuel.

Maik looks up to the daring Tschick who, deep down, is as clueless as Maik. For Maik, the journey is about widening his perspective. The trip ends in a car crash when Tschick runs away because he is afraid of being taken to an institution. Maik takes responsibility for their actions in court. His father does not approve of Maik's honesty, which gives him an excuse to leave his wife and son, who do not seem to mind. At school, the new Maik with a scar on his face gains the respect of his schoolmates. Even the girl of his dreams notices him. However, Maik is no longer interested.

The narrative is filled with youthful energy and music. The film reveals its indebtedness to teen film through some stereotypical elements, such as the queen of the class character, the popular and unpopular kids, and the teen party. Yet, most of the story takes place in a different kind of setting. During the road trip, the countryside is alternated with modern non-places, such as motorways and wind turbine parks. This can be seen as a reference to the diversity and lack of unity in Europe. The



figure of Tschick, who is referred to as Russian German, can be seen to symbolize migrant experience, and the two boys the inequality of opportunities. But although Maik's family belongs to the upper class, their lives are anything but perfect. The film seems to ask how to live and how to fit in today's world.

5.1.7 The Winner of 2018: *Wallay*

The winner of the YAA in 2018 was Berni Goldblat's drama film *Wallay* (2017). The film was an international coproduction between three countries: France, Burkina Faso, and Qatar. Ady (Makan Nathan Diarra), a 13-year-old tough guy, is sent from France to his father's home country, Burkina Faso, to learn some manners. There he meets his relatives and a different kind of culture, where elders are respected, and life is family-centred. First, Ady resists everything, but slowly learns that he must adjust to get back home. He had been embezzling money that his father's uncle had sent to his father. Now he must work for the uncle to pay back the money. The tough uncle wants to have Ady circumcised according to local custom, but Ady is not going to agree to this. From the first moment, Ady connects with his grandmother and finds comfort in her company. Despite his occasionally bad behaviour, Ady has a good heart, and the goodness that many people show towards him enables him to grow and show respect toward the uncle, whose intentions were not acceptable.

The film deals with conflicts between cultures and generations. Most of the film is shot outdoors. Part of Ady's coming of age is a long hike with his cousin to his grandmother's house. The film concentrates on the characters and their relationships. In terms of narrative, no concessions have been made to young viewers. The narrative is very low key: it reveals things little by little or indirectly, and some things may well remain hidden for viewers who are not familiar with the historical relations between France and Burkina Faso. Although the setting is an African country, which is an unfamiliar place for most European viewers, it is not exoticized. The representation of the landscape is unspectacular. Ady is another "problem kid" who gets into conflict with his family, but the



environment makes his story different. He is suddenly surrounded by people and manners that are strange to him. Despite that, even this story contains some elements typical of youth films, such as romance.

5.1.8 The Winner of 2019: *Fight Girl*

Fight Girl (*Vechtmeisje*, 2018) is about finding self-control through kickboxing. The Dutch and Belgian coproduction is directed by Johan Timmers. This the fourth award-winning film produced (partly) in the Netherlands. Bo (Aiko Beemsterboer) is a 12-year-old girl whose life is affected by her parents' quarrelsome divorce, which leads to a custody dispute. She is angry and frustrated, and she worries how her older but shy brother (Bas Keizer), who suffers from hyperglycemia, will cope in a new school. Bo finds a boxing club through a new friend and immediately starts to train hard because the coaches see potential in her. However, her aggressive behaviour almost ruins her boxing career. She beats some boys who bully her brother. Through boxing, she learns to restrain herself and accept the fact that she cannot take too much responsibility for others.

The narrative focuses on kickboxing, which is depicted in a realistic way. Bo's progress is fast, and the toughness of the matches suggests that it is not child's play. Bo fights her way to championships in what seems like a very short time. The family problems threaten to spoil her first big match, but she is determined not to let them affect her. Bo's success also helps her brother gather enough courage to further his career as a musician.

Typical gender roles are turned around: a strong female character helps a withdrawn male character believe in himself and even physically stands up for him. Bo dissociates herself from her parents' quarrel, and in the end, the most important thing is how Bo and her brother get on in their lives. The story takes place in working-class surroundings in Amsterdam. The autumn and winter scenery add to the realism of the atmosphere.



5.1.9 The Winner of 2020: *My Brother Chases Dinosaurs*

My Brother Chases Dinosaurs (*Mio fratello rincorre i dinosauri*, 2019) is the coming of age story of Jack (Francesco Ghoghi), who must accept the fact that his brother Gio has Down's syndrome. The Italian and Spanish co-produced film, directed by Stefano Cipani, touches on many themes familiar from teen films: family, school, first love, and music. The 14-year-old Jack starts at a new school in a bigger city, and his life is filled with new things. Not least a girl who is a committed environmental activist. Suddenly, it seems to Jack that Gio stands in the way of his happiness and freedom, so he blurts out that his brother is dead. Trying to keep Gio hidden from his friends gets him deeper and deeper into lies and trouble with his family and friends.

The plot takes a surprising turn when the self-centred boy tries to prevent his brother from making YouTube videos by sending him fake blackmail letters from neo-Nazis. Finally, the lies become too much for him to bear, and he confesses everything in a demonstration that his friends have arranged against neo-Nazis. Through all this, Gio continues to love his brother and be his happy-go-lucky self. In the end, Jack understands how wrong he was. Things turn back to normal, and the most important people in Jack's life forgive him.

The film emphasizes the importance of family, which in this case is very tightly knit. Although the film is aimed at teenagers, it is also family-centred and humorous. It has darker tones too, such as the observation that Gio may not live to be old and that people like him have been objects of discrimination and prejudice. The film is based on Giacomo Mazzariol's autobiographical novel with the same title.

5.1.10 The Winner of 2021: *The Crossing*

The Crossing (*Flukten over grensen*, 2020) is a Norwegian historical drama with high production values directed by Johanne Helgeland. The central character is only ten years old, and the film



creates, amid the Second World War, an adventure in which the clever children get to shine. Despite the grim context, the narrative is told in a child-friendly way.

The parents of the Christian Gerda (Anna Sofie Skarholt) and Otto (Bo Lidquist-Ellingsen) are hiding Jewish siblings Sarah (Bianca Ghilardi-Hellsten) and Daniel (Samson Steine), waiting to be smuggled to Sweden. When their parents are arrested, the children must escape the Nazis and make the journey on their own. The film's central themes, difference and prejudice, are incarnated through Gerda and Otto. The courageous Gerda is determined to help the siblings, but Otto, who has attended a Nazi meeting, hesitates. However, the dangerous journey ties the group together, and Otto makes sacrifices for the others. They learn that not all adults can be trusted and that even among Nazis, there are good individuals. One Nazi soldier even helps them escape twice.

The story is uplifting but also idealized. The viewer can rest assured that the children will make it to Sweden. Although the journey is difficult, the children never complain. They reach the destination, and the families are reunited. In the final scene, the war has ended, it is summer, and Sarah and Daniel come to visit Gerda and Otto. The film begins with archive material about Nazis. In contrast to these black and white scenes, the children's adventure is shot in cool pastel colours.

5.1.11 The Winner of 2022: *Animal*

In 2022, the award went for the first time to a documentary film, *Animal* (2021), directed by Cyril Dion. The French film deals with the relationship of humans to other animals from the point of view of two young people. The film's two protagonists, Bella and Vipulan, are both 16-year-olds. British Bella has always loved nature and is concerned about humans' destructive relationship with other animals and nature in general. Vipulan, who lives in Paris, is used to observing nature from a distance. The film follows them as they travel around the world, meeting scientists, activists, and other people who work with animals or are close to nature.



In one of the film's most distressing scenes, they meet a man who breeds thousands of rabbits in tiny cages. They also spend time with people who try to find solutions for peaceful cohabitation between sheep and wolves. They learn about success stories, like the reforestation in Costa Rica, and about the destruction of the environment, like the world's polluted seas. By the end of the film, they have learned more about why biodiversity is so important and how dependent humans are on other species. The film gives voice to the young protagonists, who are eager to not just learn more but also question the adults' opinions.

Awarding year	Title (translation/original)	Production year	Production country	Language	Genre	No. of other received awards
2012	Kauwboy	2012	The Netherlands	Dutch	drama	14
	Blue Bird	2012	Belgium	French	drama	
	Sister / L'enfant d'en haut	2012	France, Switzerland	French	crime, drama	
2013	The Zigzag Kid / Nono, het zigzag kind	2012	The Netherlands	Dutch	adventure, drama, family	7
	The Suicide Shop / Le magasin des suicides	2012	France, Belgium, Canada	English	animation, comedy, musical	
	UpsideDown / Kopfüber	2013	Germany	German	family	
2014	Regret! / Spijt!	2013	The Netherlands	Dutch	drama, family, music	9
	The Contest / MGB Missionen	2013	Denmark	Danish	family	
	Windstorm / Ostwind	2013	Germany	German		



					adventure, drama, family	
2015	The Invisible Boy / Il ragazzo invisibile	2014	Italy	Italian	action, adventure, comedy	7
	My Skinny Sister / Min lilla syster	2015	Sweden, Germany	Swedish, English	drama	
	You're Ugly Too	2015	Ireland	English	comedy, drama	
2016	Miss Impossible / Jamais contente	2016	France	French	drama	2
	Girls Lost / Pojkarna	2015	Sweden	Swedish	crime, drama, fantasy	
	Rauf	2015	Turkey	Turkish	drama, family, romance	
2017	Goodbye Berlin / Tschick	2016	Germany	German	comedy, drama, family	6
	My Life as a Zucchini / Ma vie de courgette	2016	Switzerland, France	French	animation, comedy, drama	
	The Girl Down Loch Änze / Das Mädchen vom Änzloch	2016	Switzerland	German, Romansh	documentary, drama, family	
2018	Wallay	2017	France, Burkina Faso, Qatar	French	drama	5
	Girl in Flight / La fuga	2017	Italy, Switzerland	Italian	adventure, drama, family	
	Hobbyhorse Revolution	2017	Finland	Finnish	documentary	
2019	Fight Girl / Vechtmeisje	2018	The Netherlands, Belgium	Dutch	action, drama, family	8



	Los bando	2018	Norway, Sweden	Norwegian	adventure, comedy, family	
	Old Boys	2018	UK, Sweden	English	comedy	
2020	My Brother Chases Dinosaurs / Mio fratello rincorre i dinosauri	2019	Italy, Spain	Italian	comedy, family	6
	My Extraordinary Summer with Tess / Mijn bijzonder rare week met Tess	2019	Netherlands, Germany	Dutch	comedy, drama, family	
	Rocca Changes the World / Rocca verändert die Welt	2019	Germany	German	adventure, comedy, drama	
2021	The Crossing / Flukten over grensen	2020	Norway	Norwegian	adventure, drama, family	2
	Pinocchio	2019	Italy, France	Italian	drama, family, fantasy	
	Wolfwalkers	2020	Ireland, Luxembourg, France	English	animation, action, adventure	
2022	Animal	2021	France	French, English	documentary	2
	Comedy Queen	2022	Sweden	Swedish	drama	
	Dreams Are Like Wild Tigers / Träume sind wie wilde Tiger	2021	Germany	German	comedy, family	



Table 1. Summary of the YAA nominees. The winner is in bold. Source: Web site of the European Film Academy and, for genres, the Internet Movie Database (IMDB), and for the other received European awards for the YAA films by the submission date of this report, IMDB and ECFA (n.d. b).¹

5.2 Key themes

Next, we discuss the films' contents in more detail, outlining their major themes. Three key themes, *coming of age*, *belonging*, and *social challenges*, were identified through thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2022).

5.2.1 Coming of age

Although thematic analysis is generally understood to focus on content, in film analysis, it is not possible to draw a clear distinction between meanings related to content and form. For the sake of clarity, this sub-chapter emphasizes content and the next sub-chapter focuses on form, including questions of style and narrative structure. The three key themes overlap in many ways and do not exhaust the films' topics. Also, our observations about the formal aspects of the films are rather broad. A more detailed analysis would require a close reading of each film, which is outside the scope of this report. However, some sub-themes will be distinguished below.

The first key theme running through the films is coming of age, understood here in a broad sense to mean not only the transition from the innocence of childhood to becoming an adult but also smaller steps in the process of growing up and maturing. Coming of age is one of the typical "preoccupations" of children's film that distinguishes it from adult films (Hermansson & Zepernick, 2019, p. 4). In the YAA films, it includes growing as a person, learning to take responsibility, and accepting different preconditions or events of everyday life. The fact that the term coming of age is

¹ For some films (*The Zigzag Kid*, *Wallay*, *My Brother Chases Dinosaurs*, and *The Invisible Boy*), the information on their production country varies in different sources, such as the YAA web site, the Lumiere database, and the Internet Movie Database.



used as a genre category to describe these films in the European Film Academy's educational handouts illustrates the connectedness of the questions of content and form.

As mentioned above, in two of the films, *The Zigzag Kid* and *Wallay*, a rite of passage is part of the story. In the former, Nono's bar mitzvah is celebrated at the end of the film. Bar mitzvah is a coming of age ritual in Judaism for boys when they turn 13. In the ritual, the boy gets the same rights as adults. However, Nono's incredible adventure is also a coming of age experience. During this time travel, he learns the history of his family and gets to understand himself better. Although it is a lot of fun, he must face some difficult issues too, most importantly the reason for his real mother's absence. In *Wallay*, Ady never goes through the circumcision, because it is against society's rules to perform it in secret, as the uncle plans to do. Here too, the actual coming of age process is the whole trip, during which Ady gets to know his extended family, learns from another culture, and must take responsibility for his actions. By having to work for the uncle, Ady learns that money does not come for free. Moreover, his cousin makes Ady walk a long way to his grandmother's house, although the place is not that far away. This, too, is a deliberate action to teach the impulsive boy some patience.

In *Goodbye Berlin*, the rite of passage takes the form of a road trip, which is a true "experience of limits" and a good example of a temporary utopia in which the characters feel free to do anything (Driscoll, 2011, p. 112). In other films, the rite takes the form of becoming a boxing champion (*Fight Girl*), getting entangled in one's own lies (*My Brother Chases Dinosaurs*), helping other kids to safety (*The Crossing*), or witnessing the destruction of a bullied friend (*Regret!*). In *Miss Impossible*, Aurore's performance as the lead singer of the band in front of her parents fulfils a similar function: she has been able to come to terms with the band members and overcome her shyness. For Michele, the main character of *The Invisible Boy*, the growing up process is one big adventure he ends up in without intending to do so. He gets to perform superhero actions and rescue his



schoolmates from the hands of a dangerous paramilitary group. He also learns who his real parents are.

Jack's story in *My Brother Chases Dinosaurs* is a coming of age story in the true, moral sense of the term. Although the 14- or 15-year-old boy has very close relations with his family, he is on the way to becoming more independent. At this stage of his life, he is highly sensitive to what others think about him. Therefore, he is worried that a girl he likes will not accept him, because his brother Gio has Down's syndrome. Here, the young person must learn the hard way to come to terms with differences. The film teaches this by putting Jack in awkward situations and having him suffer because of his own actions that are selfish and morally wrong. Interestingly, when Gio was born, the parents explained to the older children that Gio was a special person who had superpowers. It was only much later that Jack understood that this was not true.

In *The Crossing*, Otto, the oldest of the children who, at the beginning of the film, has some Nazi sympathies, learns to respect difference. When he and his sister must later save the Jewish children, Otto hesitates but finally joins the others for fear of letting his sister go without him. He questions the mission in the middle of the journey but hearing the wise words of his cousin and sister, he understands that it is important to help other human beings because everyone is equal. He becomes the protector of the group.

Coming of age takes different scales and forms in the films, but every time, it is at least a small step in the maturing process. Coming of age is closely linked to identity work. Modifying one's identity is sometimes necessary to better respond to other people's expectations or to be accepted. As the films show, the person may first resist because identity work means evaluating oneself critically, which may not be easy.



5.2.2 Belonging

Another broad theme that encompasses various sub-themes in the YAA films is belonging. Belonging has to do with the emotional sense of being attached to or identifying with groups of people, places, and worldviews, and it involves formal and informal processes of inclusion and exclusion. It has also been described as a feeling of being at home. The experiences and negotiations of belonging shape one's identity. Belonging is understood as more fluid than identity and therefore more appropriate to describe the experience of today's mobile people (Hiltunen et al., 2019, pp. 12–13; Lähdesmäki et al., 2016; Yuval-Davis, 2004, 2006). Art, such as films, can make visible personal feelings of belonging and non-belonging but also exclusionary practices that separate groups of people (Hiltunen et al., 2019, p. 15; Lähdesmäki et al., 2016).

The young people in YAA films struggle with finding their place in their peer group, in the larger society, or even in their family. *Wallay* deals with the experience of a migrant descendant boy, whose family lives in two countries. In his father's country, Burkina Faso, a new world and worldview opens to him, and he makes close connections with relatives he has not met before. In most films, the theme of belonging is present on an implicit level through its opposite, non-belonging. The sense of not belonging may be the result of a feeling of otherness or difference, which takes many different forms.

The two boys in *Goodbye Berlin*, Maik and Tschick, feel like outsiders, but this seems to be a problem only for Maik. Tschick may already have built a protective shield around him. Not much is revealed about his background, but the film implies that he lives without his parents, possibly in an institution. Maik in contrast longs to belong and is disappointed when once again he is not invited to a party. The film does not give a clear reason why Maik is excluded but suggests that it has something to do with his upper-class background and family situation. Tschick's situation is even worse, for even Maik does not want his company first. Tschick has dirty clothes and reeks of alcohol. Only when Tschick comes to visit Maik at his home does Maik accept him as a friend.



In *Miss Impossible*, too, the main character Aurore struggles with her sense of non-belonging. Something in her personality makes it difficult for her to fit in with her family and into the circle of friends and acquaintances. The family is frustrated with her because of her difficult temperament. She is confrontational and not always able to consider others' emotions. When a teacher asks her if she is interested in what she is saying, Aurore just responds, "not really." The teacher's reaction is to send her to the headmaster. Outside school, she makes rather strange comments to her friends. It seems that she simply cannot help being impulsive and impatient. Moreover, she is going through a lot in terms of sexual identity. Clearly, there is no easy solution to Aurore's situation and the film does not offer definitive closure, although it seems that her good performance with the band gives her confidence and makes her parents see her differently.

In many of the YAA films, conflicts arise among family members, or families are broken. My *Brother Chases Dinosaurs* emphasizes the importance of family and of sticking together more than any other of the films. Gio's special needs have knit the family closer together. They negotiate important matters around the kitchen table and in times of crisis go to have a family meeting in the parking lot where the parents first met. Conflicts arise when Jack suddenly denies the existence of Gio. As a teenager, he needs more space, and helping Gio feels like a burden. However, by the end of the story close family relations have been restored. The film seems to be saying that a family is a resource and a refuge where everyone is accepted as they are.

The young protagonists of *Animal* wonder how they could make humankind understand their dependency on other animals and that destroying nature ultimately means destroying ourselves. The film's message in a nutshell is this: People should understand that they too are animals and connected with all other living creatures on Earth, the only place we are able to inhabit. In this sense, the film deals with belonging in the most profound sense of the word, not just on a personal level and in the context of teenagers' everyday lives as the other YAA films do.



In the fiction films the negotiations of belonging lead to conflicts and confrontations that are at least partly resolved. Ending the film in an emotionally uplifting way is typical of children's films, as we noted above. Even *Animal* concludes with images of a beautiful coastline in Costa Rica, where Bella and Vipulan have witnessed an incredibly diverse rainforest ecosystem. Not all conflicts in these films, however, are about belonging; they may also result from issues and problems that are beyond the control of young people.

5.2.3 Social challenges

The third broad theme discerned in the YAA films is social challenges. In the films, the two most common settings for the stories are school and home, and these are the places where the young people encounter challenges and get into conflict. The most common social problem connected principally, but not only, to the school environment is bullying. Bullying is the main theme in *Regret!* but it is also dealt with in *The Invisible Boy*, *Goodbye Berlin*, and *Fight Girl*. A bullied person is typically excluded from the company of others, which causes feelings of non-belonging. The reasons for bullying in these films range from physical appearance to illness and factors that remain unclear, but probably have to do with the characters' families, their parents' occupations, and social status. The awarded films exemplify different degrees of bullying. In both *Regret!* and *The Invisible Boy*, bullying, or specifically mobbing, because it is the action of a group, takes the worst possible form, physical assault. In the former, bullying is systematic and cruel. In the other films, bullying takes the form of verbal abuse, exclusionary practices, and chasing. In *The Invisible Boy*, the victim is first chased, and then the whole school gathers around to laugh as the bullies hurt Michele.

Bullying is, of course, a form of delinquency. Shary and Seibel (2006, p. 4) claim that "the most common characterizations of youth globally are in terms of delinquency" and list crimes such as drug use, theft, rape, and murder. They note that young people are not always the ones to perpetuate these crimes but are also targets of delinquent acts committed by other youngsters or adults. Many of the YAA films portray young people as perpetrating even serious delinquent acts



and as victims of such acts. The mob in *Regret!* is guilty of systematically persecuting another person. For Tschick, committing petty crimes, such as “borrowing” cars or stealing fuel, appear to be everyday actions. Ady has stolen money, Jojo hits boys on the street, and Jack smokes weed and sends letters in the name of neo-Nazis. However, in most cases, it is a question of a “good kid” having made some mistakes rather than of a young delinquent on the way to becoming a criminal or marginalized.

These acts do not take place in a vacuum. The films deal with other problems, such as divorce, illness, or death in the family. Besides bullying, family issues can be singled out as another sub-theme of social challenges. Most of the protagonists come from families that are broken or have unresolved issues that affect the lives of the young characters. Mothers are either dead or absent for some other reason in *Kauwboy*, *The Zigzag Kid*, and *Wallay*. Both biological parents of Michele in *The Invisible Boy* are absent until he finds out that they are alive. In *Fight Girl*, the parents argue openly about the custody of the children. Finally, Bo washes her hands off the whole matter and decides not to attend the court where a decision on their case is made. While Maik’s mother in *Goodbye Berlin* spends the summer holiday in rehab, his father goes on a holiday with his secretary.

The Crossing is about reuniting families, although the children are by themselves for almost the whole duration of the film. The reunification of Sarah and Daniel with their parents is not shown. However, in the final scene, they arrive with their father to visit Gerda and Otto. Families remain in the background in many of the other films too, but the parents’ actions continue to affect the young protagonists. The YAA films reaffirm Noel Brown’s (2017, p. 13) observation that reaffirmation of family ties is a broad, recurrent feature of children’s and youth films. The protagonists of YAA films are so young that they still need the security provided by their families.

Kauwboy focuses almost exclusively on the main character’s difficulties at home after the death of his mother. The film stars one of the youngest protagonists in the YAA films, ten-year-old Jojo. Jojo’s life *outside* the home appears to be fine, but the mother’s death has caused Jojo and his father to



drift apart. The situation has left the father bitter, and he fails to take care of his son. Jojo tries his best to help his father out, but is burdened with too much housework, like cleaning up the mess his father has left. Jojo is a victim of domestic violence, and it appears that no-one is aware of this. Although things have improved by the end, an uncomfortable feeling remains. *Kauwboy* just shows all this without explicitly addressing the issue of domestic violence. Despite the seemingly happy ending, it is not a reassuring children's film. Rather, it shows what a child's life can be like when all is not as it should be.

Kauwboy, *Regret!*, *Wallay*, *Fight Girl*, and *Miss Impossible* portray everyday challenges and obstacles in the lives of young people. The worlds of these films are far from the exciting and romanticized lives of teenagers in some of the US teen or high school films. This is also the case in *My Brother Chases Dinosaurs* and *Goodbye Berlin*, although the trip in the latter film gives the protagonist a temporary sense of freedom. There is a dystopian feeling in *The Invisible Boy*, although the film contains escapist elements. Dark tones are also present in *The Zigzag Kid* and *The Crossing*, not to mention the timely documentary *Animal*.

Animal is the only nonfiction winner among the awarded films. It touches on all three main themes – coming of age, belonging, and social problems – but through real-life experiences. The film focuses on the environmental crisis and eco-anxiety that especially affect young people. The journey *Animal* depicts is about learning and becoming even more aware of environmental matters. The film manages to explain concepts such as biodiversity without being too didactic. Despite dealing with alarming issues, the film is not too pessimistic but gives glimpses of hope.

We conclude that thematically, the YAA films are united in their diversity. The films are no fairy tales or escapist fantasies: They deal with various socially relevant and timely topics and bring out divergent serious issues impacting on the lives of young people. The above descriptions may have given the impression that the awarded films are grim. Although none of them can be categorized first as comedies, most of them contain humour that balances the darker tones.



We conclude this thematic section by noting that most of the eleven films focus on boys' experiences. The main characters of *Kauwboy*, *The Zigzag Kid*, *Regret!*, *The Invisible Boy*, *Goodbye Berlin*, *Wallay*, and *My Brother Chases Dinosaurs* are boys. This observation is not surprising, for as Becky Parry (2019, p. 567) points out, most filmmakers across genres are male, and they mostly tell stories from a male perspective. Girls play the subsidiary roles of friends, girlfriend candidates, and the most beautiful or popular girl in the class. *Miss Impossible* and *Fight Girl* are the only films with girls as main characters, while *The Crossing* and *Animal* have both a girl and a boy, but in *The Crossing*, Gerda's experience is emphasized slightly more than Otto's. The films with boys as main characters have male directors, and most of these films' scriptwriters are male too. The directors and majority of the scriptwriters of *Miss Impossible* and *The Crossing* are female, and these are the only YAA films with female directors. The director of *Fight Girl* is male, but the scriptwriter is female.

The complex, courageous, and stubborn female protagonists of *Miss Impossible*, *Fight Girl*, and *The Crossing* challenge stereotypical roles of girls. These films also contradict Parry, who argues that stories headed by female protagonists are associated strongly with romantic narratives (2019, p. 574). *Miss Impossible* and *Fight Girl* are not thematically or stylistically different from the films with boys as main characters. We do not know what the ratio of girls to boys in the juries is, but it seems that films with boys as main characters appeal to both genders. Half of the other nominated films have girls as main characters.

5.3 Form and style

Although the eleven winners of the YAA deal with serious and sensitive themes and put their protagonists in difficult situations, the stories always end on a hopeful note. Messenger Davies (2005, p. 399) has argued that the difference between "children's screen drama" and adults' drama is that in films aimed at children, there is always hope. She adds: "this is what makes children's screen drama morally, and also structurally and aesthetically, different as a genre from much screen



drama *about* children” (Messenger Davies, 2005, p. 399). Brown (2017, p. 15) similarly observes that in children’s films, “endings are predominantly upbeat, emotionally uplifting, morally unambiguous and supportive of the social status quo.” The necessity to give hope leads to slightly forced endings in some of the YAA films, as we noted above. In contrast, some of the narratives have open endings. The lack of predictable plots and narrative structures is one characteristic of European arthouse films. Some of the YAA winners also recall the films of European directors famous for social realistic films, such as Ken Loach. *Goodbye Berlin* is directed by Fatih Akin, a younger generation filmmaker known for films such as *Head-On* (2004) dealing with contemporary social issues.

As can be seen from Table 1, in addition to being described as children’s film or youth films, seven of the eleven films can be categorized as contemporary realistic dramas; *Goodbye Berlin* is a potential borderline case with some rather exaggerated scenes. By a realistic drama, we mean films that portray everyday life through narratives that are believable, not formulaic, and leave some ambiguity.

Drama is a non-thematic and ahistorical master-genre like children’s film, which makes it a problematic category. One may argue that it does not have much explanatory value. However, it is challenging to find a more exact way to characterize the common characteristics of these eleven films. We have used Internet Movie Database (IMDB) as reference for the genre categories instead of the pedagogical handouts in which the films are also categorized. This is because handouts have been available only since 2017, the genre categories used in them are not commensurate and some of the categories are unofficial sub-categories, such as “culture clash drama” (*Wallay*) or not genres at all, such as “screen adaptation” (*Goodbye Berlin*). In the handouts, *Goodbye Berlin*, *Wallay*, and *Fight Girl* are categorized as coming of age films (along with other categories), which is not a very explanatory term either, because the coming of age-stories take place in very different kinds of contexts and use different narrative strategies. Moreover, we have chosen to use coming of age as



a thematic category. The handouts do make more fine-grained categorization of some of the coming of age films. For example, *Goodbye Berlin* is also categorized as a road movie and *Fight Girl*, as a sports movie. However, for *Kauwboy*, *Regret!*, *Wallay*, and *Miss Impossible* simple drama remains the best category, because these films do not have any specific thematic content other than coming of age and human relations, and they focus on human relationships as dramas usually do.

Another slippery genre category is family (film), which is used to categorize some of the films on IMDB. These include *My Brother Chases Dinosaurs* and *The Crossing*, which are categorized as family films (in addition to some other categories) but *Miss Impossible* and *The Invisible Boy* are not, although all these films are thematically family-oriented. The term means that the film has something to offer for the whole family (Römpötti & Karlstedt, 2021, pp. 33–34), and it is difficult to see why the latter two would not be equally suitable to families.

The films do not underestimate their audiences, and some of them, particularly *Kauwboy* and *Wallay*, feel like films about children for all audiences rather than children's or youth films. Thus, we agree with Brown (2019, pp. 227–228), who argues that contemporary children's cinema narrates challenging themes in ways that make the films appealing to adult audiences too. According to Brown, adults' and children's cultures have blended so that the former has become more youthful and the children's culture more adult.

Brown (2019, p. 227) sees two main trends in contemporary children's cinema: "the increasingly unsentimental representation of difficult and perhaps traumatic issues and the reaffirmation of the politics of social and cultural diversity." These trends are visible in the YAA winners. Low-budget European productions, free from commercial pressures and the need to appeal to everyone's taste, can deal with contentious issues more directly, as Brown (2019, pp. 227–228) notes. The YAA films are not completely free of commercial pressures, but compared to major US productions, such pressures may not have an equally strong influence on the films' content.



Here, it might be added that, after the Second World War, European cinema has been experimenting with form, and because of this, formal experimentation comes to it naturally. There is some experimentation with form in the YAA films. For example, in *Kauwboy* the narrative is punctured by sudden freeze frames, and in *Goodbye Berlin*, by short fantasy scenes that depict Maik's thoughts. Despite such aesthetic creativity, the films also repeat conventions and clichés familiar from US high school films, such as a boy falling in love with the most popular girl in the class, who ignores him. In the YAA films, there is still a lot of variation between the narratives, and the characters are fresh rather than stereotypes. This said, the analysis of the YAA winners suggests that Brown (2019, p. 241) is right to claim: "At the time of writing, children's cinema may be the most diverse and creative it has ever been."

Messenger Davies (2005, p. 393) argues that in children's screen drama, "aesthetically there is often a violation of realism" and refers to elements like fantasy and magic. If we think that a break with realism is a distinguishing feature of children's films as well, then it is indeed possible to characterize most of the YAA winners as youth films or films for even a larger audience. In only two films, *The Zigzag Kid* and *The Invisible Boy*, fantasy and magic play a significant role. The former, whose colourful and escapist world mixes reality and fantasy in a playful manner, is clearly aimed at a slightly younger audience. It may be added that *The Crossing* is a historical adventure dealing with the Nazi occupation of Norway, but it does not quite qualify as a realistic drama because the world it portrays has been simplified for a child audience. Three of the other nominated films – *Girls Lost*, *Pinocchio*, and *Wolfwalkers* – contain fantasy elements.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

6.1 Summary of analysis results

According to the European Film Academy, the Young Audience Award is meant to engage young people "who are on the border to adolescence and puberty" and are still interested in films for young



people but no longer care for children's films (email correspondence with Heidi Frankl, European Film Academy Productions, 23 March 2023). Indeed, most of the 11 awarded films can be characterized as youth films, that is, films for teenagers, but some are of interest and suitable for younger children too.² However, it needs to be emphasized that many of the films are not simply for a youth audience but also for a wider age range. The stories may deal with young people and their problems, but they are narrated in a way that appeals to older audiences as well.

Looking at the 11 YAA winners, it seems that the 12–14-year-old jury members appreciate films that have something substantial to say. In the thematic analysis of the films, three overlapping key themes were identified: coming of age, belonging, and social challenges. All the films address various social issues, some with humour. The more adventurous and entertaining YAA films are not pure escapism either, but touch on such sensitive topics as mental health issues and suicide. The YAA films are characterized by their seriousness, and a brief look at all YAA-nominated films supports this conclusion. The other nominees also deal with themes such as mental illness (depression and eating disorder), death in the family, bullying, and finding one's own way in life. There are a couple of lighter adventures and comedies too.

It needs to be remembered that adult jury members take part in the first phase of the selection, and until 2018 these adults selected the three nominated films without the preselection, and because of this the winners do not represent solely the tastes of the young audiences. Therefore, it is not possible to come to the unambiguous conclusion that the competition reflects the tastes of young people. However, when looking at all the nominees in the history of the competition, there does not seem to be marked changes in the content or style of the nominated films.

² If we look at how the films have been rated in different countries, we notice big differences. One reason for this is that the national rating systems vary a lot, but there are also cultural differences. A film permitted for six-year-olds in one country may be rated as requiring parental guidance in another. Noël Brown (2019, p. 229) has noted that the absence of consensus in this matter “reflects textual ambiguities that suggest a perceived liminality in these films' generic identity.”



As is typical for youth films, all 11 films deal with growing up and taking responsibility. This happens in different contexts, but family and school settings in urban or suburban locations play an important role in most films. The central role allocated to the family suggests that the films balance the categories of youth and children's film. The protagonists still live at home and are dependent on their parents' care. Conflicts with family members, schoolmates, and the larger society that the stories deal with are a sign of rebellion that is typical in the teenage years. In most cases, the conflicts have to do with the normal maturing process, but some of the young protagonists' actions have, or could have, serious outcomes. It is not always young people who cause conflicts with their reckless behaviour. In many of the films, parents struggle with their own problems, make mistakes, and behave in an inappropriate manner. This then affects their children. Despite thematic similarities, the YAA films display diversity in terms of narrative and film style.

Soto-Sanfiel, Villegas-Simón, and Angulo-Brunet (2021, p. 135) state that future research on young people and cinema should explore which genres young Europeans prefer. Our research on YAA films has limitations, but it suggests that most successful films in this competition have been dramas, which encompass a wide variety of films. The young jury seems to appreciate realistic, contemporary dramas with a rather straightforward style of expression. Both in the IMDB and the educational materials provided on the YAA webpage, many of the films are given several genre categories, but drama occurs the most. The success of dramas may seem surprising, because the majority of children's films and youth films are action-packed adventures. Table 1 indicates that three of the award-winning films are categorized as adventures in the IMDB – *The Zigzag Kid*, *The Invisible Boy*, and *The Crossing* – but the first and last of these are also categorized as drama and family films. Perhaps the influence of the adult jury members is reflected in the fact that there is more serious content than entertainment among the winners. However, changes in the composition of the selection committees are not really reflected in the nominated films. It is worth emphasizing once more that genre categories are slippery and overlapping, which makes genre analysis challenging.



In the analysis section of this report, we have sought to make finer distinctions by using the genre categories found in the IMDB in addition to the almost equally general categories of children's and youth film.

The majority of the YAA films are fictional. Three documentaries, one with fictional elements, have been nominated, and one of them, *Animal*, has won the award. The nominations include three animated films, but none of these have won. The language most spoken in the films is Dutch, spoken in four films. The second most common language is French, spoken in three films. Because Dutch is not a language spoken widely in Europe, this suggests that language is not a major criterion when voting for the best film. One reason behind the success of the Dutch films can be the country's strong children's film policy (Bosma, 2019). According to Statista (2023) in 2019 France was the European country that produced the second largest number of feature films, so the strong position of French language is not surprising.

6.2 Limitations of the study

There are certain limitations to the conclusions that can be drawn from this study. Only a limited number of European young people participate in the YAA juries. So far, the jury members have been aged 12–14. The audience thus represents only a small minority of European youth. Except for the age range and the nationalities, we do not have other information about the juries. Therefore, definitive conclusions about the cinema taste of young Europeans cannot be drawn based on this study. Moreover, adults take part in the voting process, which means that the winners at least partly reflect their tastes. It is also significant that the winners have been chosen by vote. There are no written statements justifying the choices. Because of this, we do not know what the young people appreciate most in these films. It can be the plot, actors, or soundtrack, as Soto-Sanfiel, Villegas-Simón, and Angulo-Brunet (2021, p. 129) conclude in their study, or something different. This report concludes only on the common characteristics of the films awarded by young juries.



A comparison between the awarded and all nominated films could have produced more detailed information about young people's film preferences, but such a large-scale comparison was outside the scope of this report. Information about the 40 to 60 films submitted to the competition but not nominated is not public. Moreover, the selection criteria of the pre-nominees were not available.

The results in this report will be complemented by other REBOOT studies, namely the forthcoming survey and focus group interviews for young people (the REBOOT deliverables D5.1 and D5.6).

6.3 Policy implications

Despite its limited scope, this study has several policy implications. First, the YAA has great potential for promoting film literacy among young people in Europe and beyond. Even though the YAA is a youth film competition, it simultaneously includes educational aims, as discussed in this report. The YAA's educational potential is still, however, rather modest. The pedagogical material available at the European Film Academy's website could be developed into a European film literacy learning programme that utilizes the best practices and lessons learned from previous film literacy programmes created in European (see e.g., European Film Factory 2023) and national projects (see e.g., Mitric, 2022 for the Danish initiative of Med Skolen i Biografen/School Cinema and JEF n.d. for promoting film literacy in Belgium; see EFAD n.d. for examples of national film education initiatives). A European-level film literacy learning programme could have intertwined cultural and social aims: to increase young people's understanding of film as a form of expression; to increase awareness of European cinema and European film heritage (see also Soto-Sanfiel et al., 2021); and to stimulate dialogue, empathy, a sense of belonging, and participation in a European community. The social themes and topics recurring in the YAA films support including such social aims in the learning programme. The development of the Academy's new YAA platform, the European Film Club, seeks to further these 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 education institutions who do not participate in the YAA awarding process and are not members of the European Film Club.

Second, the European Film Academy, European youth film producers, and the broad audience interested in youth films might benefit from a more transparent awarding process at the YAA. The Academy has succeeded in engaging numerous European, Israeli, Palestinian, and Australian film organizations and young cinema enthusiasts in the awarding process, but for a broad audience, the process is not clearly explained on the YAA web site or social media channels. Particularly, the process of preselecting the films for the youth jury and the criteria for nominating films and awarding the winners could be clarified for audiences seeking further information on the YAA. In general, information could be better centralized on the YAA's web site, providing information on previous years' competitions and awarding processes.

Third, the YAA has a narrow focus on 12–14-year-olds. The award might benefit from a broader age range for the youth jury and, thus, from a more flexible approach to young people as film audiences and as future creators and consumers of the European film industry. The European Film Academy has already taken steps to broaden the age-limit in the YAA process by including 15–19-year-olds. This will happen in the framework of the recently established European Film Club. The European Film Club is an initiative of former YAA jury members who wanted to continue watching and discussing films together. A platform through which films will be available for the registered members throughout the year will be opened in 2023. Moreover, in the future, the YAA will be a part of the European Film Club and also 15–19-year-olds will be able to vote in the competition (email correspondence with Heidi Frankl, European Film Academy Productions, 23 March and 13 April 2023).

Fourth, the YAA has great potential to advance the genre of youth film and the notion of young people as an important audience segment. This potential can be fulfilled through better public communication and promotion of the YAA and the awarded films. The YAA enables governance by



prizes, i.e., encouraging European film makers and producers to create and finance films that appeal to young audiences by recognizing their work with an esteemed award that is known and appreciated inside and outside the film industry. Yet the YAA may not function as such a prize. Promotion of the YAA requires dedicated expertise and continuous and adequate funding. The EU's long-term support for communication and promotion activities is crucial.

Fifth, the YAA films should be better accessible via TVOD platforms. Better access increases their recognition and may increase their social and economic impact through extended audiences. The lack of a common European TVOD platform(s) is a major challenge that the EU needs to address soon. Table 2 lists the total admissions of the award-winning films as reported in European Audiovisual Observatory's Lumiere database. The graphs in the database reveal that the films' distribution is limited to a small number of European countries and that most of each film's theatre admissions are domestic. This situation is similar as for European cinema in general (European Commission, 2015, p. 23). *Goodbye Berlin* has the most admissions, 1,087,224, of which 918,780 are domestic. *The Invisible Boy* has garnered the second most admissions, 779,434, and 713,185 of those are domestic.

YAA films	Total admissions in the EU & UK	Total admissions in Europe including non-EU and non-UK markets
<i>Kauwboy</i>	139,866	142,460
<i>The Zigzag Kid</i>	44,502	44,522
<i>Regret!</i>	442,405	442,532
<i>The Invisible Boy</i>	779,385	779,434
<i>Miss Impossible</i>	103,981	103,981
<i>Goodbye Berlin</i>	1,041,333	1,087,224
<i>Wallay</i>	30,595	30,595
<i>Fight Girl</i>	33,753	34,606



<i>My Brother Chases Dinosaurs</i>	485,539	485,548
<i>The Crossing</i>	11,291	159,176
<i>Animal</i>	137,528	146,865

Table 2. Total admissions of the award-winning films. The first number refers to total admissions generated in the EU and the UK and the second to admissions generated in the broader Europe, including non-EU and non-UK markets. The film that has the most admissions is in bold. Source: Lumiere database.

Sixth, the accessibility of the YAA films increases through multilingual subtitles and/or dubbing. The EU could support the translation of subtitles for the YAA films, as it does with the films awarded the LUX Audience Prize. Besides multilingual subtitles, the promotion of the YAA films could be linked to the pedagogical aims of promoting linguistic and cultural diversity in Europe. The characters in the YAA films spoke Germanic and Romance languages. Previous research (Petar, 2022) has indicated that young European audiences prefer films in which the characters speak either their “mother tongue” or English. The linguistic variety in the YAA films shows, however, that young audiences may not be as linguistically selective as previous research suggests. Our data, though, does not enable a comparison between jury members’ preferences from different countries. To strengthen the competitiveness of the European film industry among European audiences in the future, it is important that European young people are interested in watching linguistically and culturally diverse films.

The YAA is an important film prize that deserves wider recognition and appreciation among diverse audiences, filmmakers, producers, educators, and policymakers. The YAA has great potential to promote European youth films, pay attention to young people as an important audience segment, promote multilingualism and cultural diversity in Europe, and build competencies for future European film professionals. The awarding process of the YAA engages thousands of young people in a community of film enthusiasts every year and gives voice to young people arguing their film preferences. The European Film Academy has ambitious plans to develop these activities in the future. The utilization of the full potential of the YAA is, however, still in its infancy. Better



communication, promotion, and funding are likely to increase the YAA's impact on the European film industry and its competitiveness in Europe and beyond.

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