

# Screening Literacy: Reflecting on Models of Film Education in Europe

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English abstract

This article, building on an extensive summary of the European-scale Experts' Study on film literacy in Europe 2012, draws attention to two different conceptions of film education: as an (a) entitlement for all, a social good (akin to the entitlement to universal literacy) and as (b) an instrumental means of developing film consumers, or audiences. Based upon a large survey of film education across 32 European countries, the authors give the context of film literacy in Europe three perspectives: (1) The established practice of film educators across all sectors in the member states; (2) the wider arguments about film culture and its importance; and (3) the relation between film literacy and media literacy, especially in the context of the EC's media literacy initiative. We also reflect at the end on the relation between film education and the affordances, limitations and misconceptions surrounding digital technologies.

**Keywords:** Film literacy, film education, production of film language, convergence culture.

## Introduction

Europe has a long tradition of moving image education. The abiding motivation for this is the film cultures of Europe, and a longstanding desire in many countries to make this heritage accessible to children and young people. As with other art-forms, such as literature, music and art, this desire is to some extent manifested in school curricula, in the work of independent agencies, in institutes which are custodians of national archives, and in a variety of voluntary organisations. In addition, the film industry itself has supported educational work, motivated often by the desire to develop future audiences. However, despite the best of intentions, it is fair to say that film education has always struggled to establish itself in school curricula. While the ‘traditional’ arts, especially music, art and literature, have commonly been established as core elements of national curricula, film (and media more generally) have typically been either absent or marginal. The findings of this report provide, for the first time, a confirmation of this picture in some detail.

This article, building on an extensive summary of the European-scale Experts’ Study on film literacy in Europe, draws attention to two different conceptions of film education:<sup>1</sup> as an (a) entitlement for all, a social good (akin to the entitlement to universal literacy) and as (b) an instrumental means of developing film consumers, or audiences. Based upon a large survey of film education across 32 European countries, the authors give the context of film literacy in Europe three perspectives: (1) the established practice of film educators across all sectors in the member states; (2) the wider arguments about film culture and its importance; and (3) the relation between film literacy and media literacy, especially in the context of the EC’s media literacy initiative. The latter perspective will be elaborated in this piece, and related to wider discourses around media and digital literacy.

The relationship between film education/literacy and media education/literacy raises several questions. One is the relation between critical appreciation and creative production, and the shift in recent years, with access to affordable filming and editing equipment, towards the latter (Burn & Durran, 2007). Another is the tension between film (often conceived as an art form) and media more generally (often conceived as entertainment and information). These relations recognise that the aims of media education and film education are virtually identical – to foster a wider literacy which incorporates broad cultural experience, aesthetic appreciation, critical understanding and creative production. And it recognises that, in an era of ‘convergence culture’ and a great variety of cultures of digital production, young people’s engagement with powerful media fictions may range across books, comics, films, television dramas and video games (Burn, 2009a). In this respect, film education can be viewed as a subset of media education, the two working best hand-in-hand.

At the same time however, attention needs to be paid to the distinctiveness of the language of the moving image – as a meaning-making system – which is distinct from print-based modes, like writing, or time-based languages like music or spoken language. In fact, there is an argument that literacy is a set of capacities that fit specific *modes*, not different *media*, and that the digital medium – a set of electronic signals based on binary code – does not need a *literacy* at all. In this sense one might argue that literacy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is a set of cultural practices that enable engagement with and expression through a small number of dominant meaning-making modes: speech, writing, still and moving image, and music.<sup>2</sup> However, it also needs to be recognised that the mode of the moving image – the ‘kineikonic mode’ (Burn & Parker, 2003) – is multimodal – it integrates image, speech, music, architecture, dramatic action and other signifying systems within the overarching assemblages of filming and editing.

## Re-defining film and media literacy in a digital era

The European Commission's definition of film literacy from the original tender specification was: 'the level of understanding of a film, the ability to be conscious and curious in the choice of films and the competence to critically watch a film and to analyse its content, cinematography and technical aspects'. With this definition as a point of departure, we have revised the definition as follows:

*The level of understanding of a film, the ability to be conscious and curious in the choice of films; the competence to critically watch a film and to analyse its content, cinematography and technical aspects; **and the ability to manipulate its language and technical resources in creative moving image production.** (our revision in bold)*

The purpose behind film literacy as defined by the European Commission is: 'for young people, to provide awareness and knowledge about our film heritage and increasing interest in these films and in recent European films, the ultimate goal being to build a long term audience for European films.' We would like to extend this purpose to encompass a universal entitlement on behalf of all citizens 'to be introduced to the fundamentals of the moving image, and to be able to master some of its language.' Somewhat paradoxically, mastery of the *language* of the moving image becomes more, not less, important in an era of widespread access to digital technologies: our contention is that technology in itself does not make someone creative – notwithstanding the excitable language of software and hardware advertising.

In other words, film literacy is both about understanding the language of moving images, and to some extent mastering the language of moving images in creative digital production. From 2014 the MEDIA programme will be subsumed into Creative Europe, and the outcomes of this research project we hope will inform the shape of the media and film literacy dimensions of Creative Europe.

## Methodology

In setting out to survey film literacy across Europe, the major research instrument we used was a series of questionnaires delivered by the online survey tool *Survey Monkey*, which were created, trialled and tested during January 2012. We consulted our research partners on its suitability and ease of use, and on the value of the data it produced. We invited the partners to look through the survey before we asked them to fill it in, so that they could familiarize themselves with it, and suggest any last minute changes. The survey was structured into five parts: (1) film literacy provision in formal education; (2) in informal education; (3) through the audio-visual industries; (4) through cultural organizations; and (5) professional development of film educators.<sup>3</sup> The surveys were completed by one third of the partners in February 2012, and by a further 20 partners, in June 2012. An additional correspondent corroborated the surveys for each nation. The outcomes of each national survey were compiled into a series of 'national pictures' of film literacy. We have 32 of these pictures, running to sometimes 3 or 4 pages per country. We also solicited a number of case studies across all the nations, in the end publishing 50 case studies subdivided into the sector or type of activity.<sup>4</sup>

## Findings

We categorised our findings in terms of the Why?, What?, Where?, Who?, and How? of film education. That is, we summarised responses to questions across the formal, informal and audio-visual industry sectors about:

- Aims and purposes (Why?)
- Strategies and types of provision (What?)
- Providers and recipients of film education (Who?)
- Curriculum and non-curriculum settings for film education (Where?)
- And the different types of activity, funding and levels of assessment and evaluation of film education, across the three sectors (How?)

We then created an ‘ideal type’ of film education, a ‘composite model’, comprising all the strong factors which we found contributed to good practice in a generalised national setting, which we set out below.

### Models and rationale for film education

It is likely that a strong film education ecology is part of a **wider culture in film**, that supports education and access to film for a range of people – children, older people, diverse and marginal groups – and public funding of film culture will follow this commitment. Learners, and learning, in informal education will be **valued as highly** as in formal settings, and recognised as operating differently. There will typically be a commitment to having film education provision **robustly and independently evaluated**, and providers, even at a national level, will have a clear commitment to improving their provision. These countries will feature **high levels of participation** in film education, in activities that are **sustained across a period of time**, with **measured and recorded outcomes**. Funding responsibilities will be distributed across **public, commercial, education and cultural** sectors, and delivered around a shared national plan.

The film education workforce, from trained film teachers, to teachers of other subjects with an interest in film, to support workers in schools, and then workers in the informal sector (freelance educators, youth and community workers, cultural workers) will have recognisable and funded **professional development opportunities** that support them from entry level to expert status, and with **accreditation** to validate their development.

### Findings – Why? Aims and purposes

The responses from national representatives indicated a clear set of priorities. The highest priority in the formal curriculum (selected by most countries) was given to the development of film language and filmmaking skills, closely followed by the understanding of film as an art form, critical viewing and other categories referring to the critical understanding and analysis of film texts. Middle-ranking categories (selected by approximately half the respondents) included social and civic education, wider viewing, enjoyment, understanding of national and European film heritage, and access to world cinema. Lower-ranking categories (selected by approximately a third of respondents) included audience development and choice, and access to and understanding of popular cinema.

In relation to the informal sector, the priorities were broadly similar, with the exception of skills of textual analysis (ranked bottom), audience development and choice, and enjoyment (ranked higher). These are to be expected, perhaps; more surprising was that social and civic participation was ranked lower, in the bottom third.

None of the categories in either sector were selected by fewer than 8 countries, suggesting that all categories should play a part in an ideal model of film education in Europe, appropriately weighted. But what is salient overall is the highest priority placed on understanding and appreciating film as an art form, when compared to other instrumental purposes behind film education, and this priority expressed as a *making* activity, as well as a critical viewing practice.

### **Where? In the curriculum and outside school**

The formal curriculum is the single most effective instrument for delivering an ‘entitlement model’ of film literacy for all. The findings indicate where in the curriculum film education is located; what form it takes; whether it is an option for some students or an entitlement for all students (and at which level); what kind of participation or take-up is known or can be estimated; and what national recording of attainment takes place. In relation to curriculum location, the results are unsurprising. Film education is most likely to be integrated into other subjects (a model which our respondents felt weakened specialist delivery at best, and at worst concealed what little production work was found) – and this model applied across all age phases. The second most common model was for film education to be an optional subject, though this mostly applied in middle and high school phases; or for it to be an optional part of media education, which was more evenly distributed across the age phases. The least common model was for film education to be a discrete subject in the core curriculum, which was only found in one country at primary level, two at middle level and four at high school level.

In terms of curriculum clustering and embedding, many models are in evidence. Most common is still the association of film literacy with literacy and mother tongue education (eg **UK, Ireland, Germany, Norway and Sweden**). However, it is increasingly common for countries to specify a general programme of media education, into which film education is integrated, and this is the case, for example, in the **Netherlands, Hungary, Cyprus, Finland, France, Malta, Croatia, Slovakia and Switzerland** (though in some of these cases, it is an optional component).<sup>5</sup>

In formal education, then, the general pattern is of patchy and sometimes weak provision: no full core entitlement; few countries where a majority of the school populations receive film education; much evidence of provision weakened by absorption into other subjects or cross-curricular distribution; almost no national records of attainment or progression, except where film education becomes a formal examination subject in high schools in some countries. On the positive side, there is good evidence of specialist provision in some countries, especially in the upper years of secondary schooling. Also, there is evidence that, where film education is strongly-represented within media education programmes, it can benefit from coherent conceptual frameworks and specialist attention to creative production work.

We found few examples of nationally co-ordinated after-school film education activity. Film clubs are offered in several countries. Where after-school provision exists, it rarely offers an integrated combination of critical understanding, cultural access and creative practice. Provision is much more likely to focus on one, not all, of these elements.<sup>6</sup>

Only one country, **France**, has a formally structured national programme of film education for young people outside school. Elsewhere, the organisations which provide film education outside school, and beyond school age, are fairly evenly spread across cinemas and film festivals, adult colleges, film societies, galleries and museums, film archive centres and a variety of community spaces. Film education in the informal sector would however benefit from more substantial and sustained professional development: for youth and community workers, for freelance film professionals working in education; and for adult educators.

### Who? Providers and recipients

In most countries, the Ministry of Education has some role to play, though as indicated above, provision here ranges from relatively strong and coherent models such as **Hungary's** to models where film education is represented tokenistically if at all. Other providers which appear to be effective are film institutes such as those in **Sweden, Denmark, Norway, France** and the **UK**, though an important feature of successful work there is seen to be co-ordination with other networks and with a national strategy. These networks include the other kinds of provider: jointly-funded organisations such as **Germany's** Vision Kino, societies and associations such as **Finland's** Mediakasvatusseura, film festivals such as those provided by **Belgium's** Brussels-Wallonia Federation, or the children's film festivals in Thessaloniki and Cyprus. We gathered many examples of film education projects that focus on both making, and critically engaging with film. Film camps are popular (*StationNext* in **Denmark**, the **CR** and **Hungary**; and in **Poland** at the *Studio of Educational films and Programmes* in Lodz). In many countries, the film industry supports film education initiatives such as film museum work, study days, festival programmes or free screenings. The majority of such support was directed at schools, with some provision in some countries for children and families. The least provision was for adult learners, with the exception of cinema screenings, and a couple of public service broadcasters.

In addition to young people and schools, we asked about specialised provision for senior citizens, local communities, cinephiles and families. Predictably, schools and universities were best catered for with published resources, online support and cinema screenings; while senior citizens were least well catered for, with little provision other than screenings.<sup>7</sup>

### Who? Teacher and educator training

We found nationwide training programmes for teachers only in **Poland** (through *Filmoteka Szkolna*), the **UK** (in Northern Ireland; in the mid 2000s in England), **Hungary** and **Finland**. Several countries have national in-service programmes with opt-in provision: e.g. **France, Iceland, Malta** and **Austria**. Otherwise, training for education professionals in film literacy is optional, ad hoc, and locally or regionally coordinated – and then not by education ministries.

As with media education more generally, the issue is with the lack of film education provision in initial teacher education, the patchiness of in-service provision to follow it up, and the more serious lack of systematic training for educators in the informal sector. Thirteen countries offer HE accreditation at Master's level as part of their in-service provision, which in principle can improve quality and status.

## Film and Digital Literacy

Although we did not formally consider it as part of the survey, it is possible to reflect on some of the relations between film literacy and film education, and a set of emerging creative and cultural practices that feature digital technologies as part of their ‘operating system’. There is much excitement over the potential of digital technologies to transform educational practices – a rush to the ‘digital sublime’, critiqued by David Buckingham as being in large part driven by the technology industries’ desire to access the education market (Buckingham, 2007).

But here, as elsewhere (Reid et al, 2002), we would advise caution in equating ‘film’ (or other media) with ‘digital technology’. Try this thought experiment: Orson Welles is brought back to life, and given an iPhone. ‘Orson’, we tell him, ‘You can make a film on one of these now.’ How long do you think it would take him to create something interesting? Half an hour? Maybe 45 minutes, if he had to be shown the editing software, and his editor was not available? (We’re tempted to imagine him saying ‘an iPhone is like the best train set a boy ever had.’) Giving an iPhone to a teenager (or an iPad, as many schools are currently doing), on the other hand, will not make them Orson Welles...

This is because the language of film, its peculiar conventions, rules of grammar and syntax, has not fundamentally changed since 1928 and the first sound film. A cinema-goer falling asleep in 1926, and waking in 1986, would recognise the medium still, if not the hair styles. Fall asleep in 1900, and wake in 1920, and you would find the evolution of film had passed through phases (close-ups, moving camera, continuity and parallel editing, feature length) that had passed you by.

However, film has always been a restless and innovative art-form, and new genres and styles have sprung up in recent years which in different ways depend on the digital environment, the participatory Internet and the related cultures of video games. Examples would be new short forms found on *YouTube*, such as mash-ups, tributes, spoofs, campaign videos (Willett, 2009); mobile phone genres such as citizen journalist pieces; and *machinima*, the new animation form emerging from games and virtual worlds (Burn, 2009b).

## Final Remarks: On Translation

We were struck during this survey by how much excellent practice already exists in film literacy provision, and noted this alongside a tendency in funded programmes to constantly (re)invent practice as if for the first time. This coincided with a reflection on the role that *translation* plays in European culture, and in the European project more narrowly. The essence of European identity is impossible to find, among the many dozens of nations, sub-national communities, the hundreds of languages, and the constant morphing of peoples and cultures accommodating new influences from abroad.

Similarly, we realised that a common, core definition of film literacy, that would satisfy all stakeholders, across all 32 countries, would be impossible to agree upon. Instead, we recognise that like European culture itself, maybe film literacy inheres in a flexible and adaptable set of practices that change depending on context: for mobile devices or cinemas, in Media Studies, History, or Civics, as universal entitlement, or narrow vocational journey, in all these settings film literacy has something powerful to offer young people.

We aim to encapsulate ‘the translation principle’ in our Recommendations, so that priority for funding is given to initiatives that seek to grow an activity or idea imported from somewhere else,

to graft it onto a new context, and so build a more sustained film education network that uses *translation* – so typically felt to be the European weakness – as its strength.

*The core research team for Screening Literacy consisted of a consortium of the BFI, the London University Institute of Education and the industry body Film Education. The three Research Directors were Mark Reid (BFI), Professor Andrew Burn (IoE) and Ian Wall (Film Education). The research programme was co-ordinated by Wendy Earle, and the core researchers were Michelle Cannon, Kate Domaille and Caren Willig. We were very ably assisted by MA students Alice Guilluy and Alejandra de Leiva.*

*Our core research partners were drawn from Poland (PISE, the Polish Film Institute), Greece (IOM, the Hellenic Audio-Visual Institute), Portugal (University of the Algarve), Germany (Vision Kino), Italy (University of Roma Tre), Ireland (Irish Film Institute), Denmark (StationNext), Hungary (Hungarian Moving Image Media Education Association), Slovenia (Slovenian Film Institute), the Netherlands (EYE, the Dutch Film Institute) and the Czech Republic (CR Film Education Board). We created an Experts' Group from this list: Vitor Reia-Batista; Simone Moraldi; Irene Andriopoulou; Sara Duve; and Laszlo Hartai. The project had a Steering Group based in the MEDIA Unit of the European Commission.*

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## Appendix – 14 Recommendations

**RECOMMENDATION 1:** draft a model of film education for Europe, including appreciation of film as an art form, critical understanding, access to national heritage, world cinema and popular film, and creative film-making skills.

**RECOMMENDATION 2:** the EC should support the institution of a Film Literacy Advisory Group (flag) to draft such a model, and to advise on initiatives in the other recommendations.

**RECOMMENDATION 3:** we found a range of valuable strategic policies and instruments which we believe member states would benefit from examining and learning from. We propose a 'Translation Fund' which supports national agencies in adapting strategic approaches from other, similar nations and territories, and supports the professional development of key workers in those agencies in meeting and learning from colleagues in other countries.

**RECOMMENDATION 4:** member states should ensure that core programmes of media education, with a robust film education element, are provided at both primary and secondary levels; to provide annual figures of take-up in optional film education; and to provide data on attainment and progression.

**RECOMMENDATION 5:** the EC should provide guidance on effective curriculum models' levels of minimum provision, and appropriate pedagogies, relating them to mother tongue provision, arts education and new media/ICT.

**RECOMMENDATION 6:** the EC should consider funding outreach schemes to the new members states, modelled by successful providers of informal film education in Europe.

**RECOMMENDATION 7:** where member states provide tax breaks, lottery funding or other incentives for the film industry, they should consider incorporating requirements for the funding of venue-based and other education programmes, enhanced screening events and support for festivals.

**RECOMMENDATION 8:** the EC should provide guidelines on the creative exploitation of national and regional film archives, including guidance on copyright and IP clearance for classroom use.

**RECOMMENDATION 9:** consideration should be given to supporting education programmes for wider adult communities, focusing on diverse, migrant and older people, maybe by funding 'translations' of such programmes from one territory to another.

**RECOMMENDATION 10:** the EC should sponsor, in tandem with the industry, a European bank of exemplar online resources drawn from good practice across the EU.

**RECOMMENDATION 11:** member states should incorporate media education, with a robust film education component, within initial teacher education programmes.

**RECOMMENDATION 12:** the EC should provide online guidance on best practice in in-service provision across the EU.

**RECOMMENDATION 13:** the EC should investigate collaborative models for the collaborative provision of accredited training at m-level, e.g. in association with the Erasmus Mundus programme.

**RECOMMENDATION 14:** the EC should sponsor research into levels of funding for media education and film education, in order to provide guidance on minimum provision, models of joint funding and strategies for effective direction of financial resources.

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1 The core research team for the Screening Literacy consisted of a consortium of the BFI, the London University Institute of Education and the industry body Film Education. The three Research Directors were Mark Reid (BFI), Professor Andrew Burn (IoE) and Ian Wall (Film Education). The research programme was co-ordinated by Wendy Earle, and the core researchers were Michelle Cannon, Kate Domaille and Caren Willig. We were very ably assisted by MA students Alice Guilluy and Alejandra de Leiva. The project had a Steering Group based in the MEDIA Unit of the European Commission.

2 For an elaboration of this argument, see Reid, M, 'Reframing literacy: a film pitch for the 21<sup>st</sup> century', *English, Drama, Media*, Issue 14, June 2009.

- 3 There were in all 103 questions to be answered, a task which took an experienced respondent up to a day to complete, but which we felt gave the best chance of a comprehensive picture of each country. We asked about strategic leadership, funding, type of provision, training for teachers, numbers reached and mode of evaluation.
- 4 We were conscious that some areas of activity were neglected, and so created specific survey pictures: of family education, cinema-based provision, film heritage education and a group of case studies profiling 'transnational' film literacy programmes. All of these will be published as Appendices to the main report.
- 5 Less common combinations were with history (**Latvia**), ICT (**Iceland** – though also with mother tongue literacy); and the arts (**Italy** and **the Netherlands**).
- 6 One exception is *le Cinéma: cent ans de jeunesse*, run by the *Cinémathèque Française*. It involves partners from seven different countries, six in Europe, in an innovative approach to film aesthetics, with a strong professional development component. It has been running for 17 years and we believe it is an exemplar of transnational 'translated' film culture. We would like to see it developed further as a model, with EC support.
- 7 We commissioned a fuller outline of provision for families, as we were conscious that this is an area of wider cultural education in which there is exciting practice (in Reggio Emilia, for example). See the Appendix in the full report for our report on film education for families.