

# Festivals of European Film and Their Image of Europe

## Religious Complications<sup>1</sup>

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### 1. Introduction

What is the Europe of festivals of European film? How do they define European films, and what are the concerns, the stories of Europe told in them? And what role does religion play in these films and their ideas of Europe? In this study, I investigate the image of Europe constructed through festivals of European film via their self-presentations and the films they screen, motivated by the coincidence of two observations made about Europe and film festivals: Jürgen Habermas (as well as others) notes the importance of a European public sphere in which citizens debate problems and decisions, as a precondition for the development of a collective European political and cultural identity, a sense of belonging.<sup>2</sup> Drawing on Habermas's notion of the public sphere, Thomas Elsaesser then describes film festivals as »the symbolic agoras of a new democracy.«<sup>3</sup> Bringing these two assessments together, one can then posit that festivals of European film function as a space where ideas and concerns of Europe are debated and negotiated – explicitly or implicitly – in the interaction between their various stakeholders: film producers

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1 I am grateful to Jacob Given for our exchange of ideas in the initial phase of this project. Thank you also to the production or distribution companies that have allowed me access to screen their films.

2 Referenced in Quenzel 2005, 11.

3 Elsaesser 2005c, 103.

and their films, festival organisers and curators, industry guests and media, political and economic entities, and not least the audience.

While certainly not the only space in which discourses around Europe take place, European films and their festivals are interesting in this regard, for two reasons: first, and on a general level, with its capacity to both reflect and construct reality and its affective as well as cognitive forms of address, the importance of film for the formation of individual and collective identity has been widely recognised.<sup>4</sup> And second, while the definition of European film is contested, as will be seen below, one way of characterising a film as European is its focus on themes and concerns relevant to Europe and those living there.<sup>5</sup>

Thus Jill Forbes and Sarah Street describe as the main challenge for European cinema »negotiating a cultural space for the fluid, unstable and ever-changing facets of European identity.«<sup>6</sup> The importance of cinema in this regard is also noted by Wim Wenders who, as Stan Jones observes, »warns of the supreme importance of retaining specifically European cinema, since without its own images, Europe will lose its identity.«<sup>7</sup> European cinema's importance for Europe is further reflected in the fact that films »as an expression of national and cultural identity« have been exempt from the international free trade agreement during the GATT talks in 1993,<sup>8</sup> and in the integration of media and cultural policies via article 128 on culture in the Maastricht Treaty,<sup>9</sup> as well as EU programmes for the promotion of film production and distribution, such as Eurimage or MEDIA.<sup>10</sup>

Here, I argue that the Europe emerging from the profiles of the festivals and their programming is marked by inclusivity and diversity, emphasising geographical and cultural dimensions, as well as an ethics of social justice and concern for those at the margins. While religion is not a predominant theme, it is nonetheless one of the voices heard in the public sphere of the festivals, and its presence and contributions complicate the secularisation narrative

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4 As noted, with a focus on European film, for example by Ezra 2004b, 218.

5 See Everett 2005a, 9.

6 Forbes/Street 2000, 48.

7 Jones 2005, 51.

8 Ezra 2004a, 16. The issue was not conclusively resolved, however, leaving it open to further negotiation.

9 Bondebjerg 2012, 650.

10 Forbes/Street 2000, 24.

of Enlightenment Europe as well as dualistic perceptions of religious traditions as markers of belonging and difference, and thus sources of conflict.

I will begin by briefly outlining some salient points in the theory of European film and film festival studies that frame this chapter. After a more general overview of the goals of festivals of European film and their vision of Europe, I will focus on the festival Crossing Europe in Linz (Austria) as a representative case study and discuss its construction of Europe through the analysis of its self-representation, media reception, and programming. The article concludes with the discussion of the complex role of religion in Crossing Europe's construction of Europe via the more detailed analysis of two recent award winners, *Beginning* (Dasatskisi, Dea Kulumbegashvili, GE/FR 2020) and *Oray* (Mehmet Akif Büyükatalay, DE 2019).

## 2. Theoretical framework: European film and film festivals

The debates about approaches to European film and film festivals are, of course, wide ranging and often quite controversial. In the following discussion, I engage with only those aspects that are relevant for my particular research interest, the image of Europe developed through festivals of European film, and the role of religion in it.

### 2.1. European film: A reality or a discursive construction?

European film shares with Europe the difficulty of defining exactly what it is: films produced in Europe? But then, which countries exactly count as »Europe«, and what about co-productions with non-European ones? Or films set in Europe? But how about a US-production like *Before Sunset* (Richard Linklater, 2004), set and filmed entirely in Paris? Or is it films whose creators have a European background? But this, too, isn't a helpful criterion because of the mobility of cast and crew, both within Europe and beyond. Is it a question of style, then, with auteur or arthouse films the »quintessential« European film? Yet this leaves out of consideration a large number of European popular productions, such as *Der Schuh des Manitu* (Michael Herbig, DE/SP 2001), certainly not an arthouse film but one of the financially most successful European films in recent years. Does European film even exist,

as something different than the sum of national cinemas in Europe, or is it a purely theoretical category, as Wendy Everett asks?<sup>11</sup>

Similar to discourses about Europe, the easiest way to define European cinema seems to be by distinction from its other, Hollywood cinema: while Hollywood films work with plots organised in a question-answer scheme and with a focus on solving the problems posed to their characters, use faster editing and tend to align image and sound, European films are slower, tend to have a de-centered plot that explores the dilemmas faced by their complex characters whose motivations are psychologically driven but usually implicit, with ambiguous stories left open to interpretation, and might include self-reflexive or ironic elements.<sup>12</sup> Of course, these distinctions are not as clear-cut as it appears, either, and even more importantly, they implicitly associate European film with the auteur or arthouse tradition (ironically, developed originally in light of the work of Hollywood directors such as Alfred Hitchcock) characterised by these elements.

While much of the theory of European film seems to have considered it through the lens of national cinemas, Tim Bergfelder proposes to reconceive of European cinema as »transnational« to reflect the movements and relationships between cultural and geographical contexts.<sup>13</sup> Drawing on Ulf Hannerz, Bergfelder uses »transnational« as describing phenomena of various scale involving different actors<sup>14</sup> to understand the mutual exchanges that characterise European cinema today: co-productions with various national or European funding bodies, migrations of directors, crew and cast among various centres of production, and the experience of diaspora as »a mode of everyday experience and [...] a mode of imagination«, of those involved in the making of a film as well as its recipients.<sup>15</sup> European cinema in Bergfelder's understanding then is less a clearly defined category than »an ongoing process, marked by indeterminacy or ›in-between-ness«.<sup>16</sup>

European co-productions – an economic necessity but also promoted by EU media programmes – contribute to the transnational dimension of

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11 Everett 2005a, 8.

12 Elsaesser 2005b, 43–44; Everett 2005b, 17.

13 Bergfelder 2005, 320.

14 Bergfelder 2005, 321.

15 Bergfelder 2005, 322.

16 Bergfelder 2005, 320.

European film at the same time as they focus attention on cultural distinctness, reminiscent of the European motto »United in diversity«. Bergfelder thus notes that

in its contested position between national and supranational interests the study of European cinema can be seen to mirror the central debate of the European project more generally, namely to negotiate and reconcile the desires for cultural specificity and national identity with the larger ideal of a supranational community.<sup>17</sup>

In spite of these complexities of defining European cinema, two characteristics still appear as prominent: a particular style associated with arthouse cinema, as mentioned above, and a focus on socially relevant themes such as identity, memory, conflict, poverty, marginalisation, or disconnectedness.<sup>18</sup> Style and content are, of course, interconnected and reinforce each other: the art(house) or auteur cinema (problematic and slippery as the categories may be)<sup>19</sup> is associated with a stylistic preference for realism, abstraction, and/or artistic experimentation and innovation, which lend themselves to the exploration of reality, self-understanding, and socio-political issues. This is noted by Stefano Baschiera and Francesco di Chiara in their analysis of the Lux Prize of the European Parliament, which promotes arthouse cinema »not only [as] part of a tastemaking operation aimed at perpetuating the values of a film heritage. Rather, it is the style of European art cinema that seems to be perceived by European institutions as the most viable for tackling topics that are relevant to the contemporary debate on social rights in Europe.«<sup>20</sup> Thus arthouse cinema still stands for creative autonomy and the socio-politically engaged filmmaking which is taken to be characteristic of European cinema today, as Everett notes: »European films frequently adopt a sceptical view of society and the establishment, and their ironic gaze frequently seeks to provoke, challenge, and disturb.«<sup>21</sup>

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17 Bergfelder 2005, 315.

18 Everett 2005a, 12; Everett 2005b, 24–25; Orr 2004, 301. Religion as a topic of European film is – conspicuously but unsurprisingly – absent.

19 Bergfelder 2005, 317.

20 Baschiera/Di Chiara 2018, 247.

21 Everett 2005a, 12.

## 2.2. Film festivals and their functions

The description of European film as aesthetically challenging, socio-politically critical and transnational is mutually related to the theorisation of film festivals as aesthetic tastemakers and bestowers of prestige, as a public sphere for the debate of socio-political issues, and a transnational network of multiple actors in mutual and dynamic relationships with each other.<sup>22</sup> This reciprocal affirmation of criteria of excellence based in the European arthouse tradition (distinguishing both films and the festivals that screen them) is not altogether surprising given the Eurocentrism of the festival circuit (in spite of its more recent global expansion)<sup>23</sup> and its self-differentiation from Hollywood cinema.

The frequently used term »festival circuit« implies that film festivals are best understood not as individual, local events occurring independently from each other, but as interconnected in a transnational network with multiple and interdependent, human and non-human actors:<sup>24</sup> festival organisers, films, filmmakers, industry participants (producers, distributors), audiences, press and other media, policy makers, funders, tourism and the service industry all make up this network with their multiple interests, interactions with and impact on each other.<sup>25</sup> The festival network provides both stability, at the very least through a reliable schedule that allows planning in production and exhibition, and flexibility or surprise,<sup>26</sup> for example in the discovery of a new masterpiece or a new trend in filmmaking, necessary for the legitimisation of festivals as spaces of cinematic innovation and aesthetic quality. While the actor-network theory helps to understand both the functioning of individual festivals and the festival circuit in general, it does not account for the power dynamics that further some connections and inhibit others, nor for the neocolonial tendencies at work in the festival circuit.<sup>27</sup>

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22 For a brief summary of theoretical positions in film festival studies, see Iordanova 2013, 11–12; Elsaesser 2005c, 83.

23 The A-list of festivals curated by the Fédération internationale des associations de producteurs de films now includes – with a continued heavy emphasis on Europe – festivals in Asia, North and South America, and northern Africa, [http://www.fiapf.org/intfilmfestivals\\_sites.asp](http://www.fiapf.org/intfilmfestivals_sites.asp) (accessed August 12, 2021).

24 De Valck 2007, 32–35.

25 De Valck 2013, 98.

26 Elsaesser 2005c, 87.

27 See for example Falicov 2016, 210–212.

Nevertheless, it is useful to understand the role of the various actors in the network as participants in public debates around the idea of Europe.

The function of festivals in public discourses has been theorised through Habermas's notion of the public sphere and further developed to take into account the limitations to participation in the public sphere, for example by time or education, and the existence of alternative public spheres, counter- or subaltern publics.<sup>28</sup> Cindy Hing-Yuk Wong applies this understanding of multiple and transnational public spheres to film festivals: »[f]ilm festivals thus participate in the varied public and counterpublic spheres in the larger world, adding their distinctive contributions to the discursive formations of the public spheres and our conceptualization of them.«<sup>29</sup> The interactions between the multiple actors in the festival network create multiple discourses that may reinforce or contradict each other, affirm or critique ideological positions, remain connected to the local or national sphere and reach beyond it.<sup>30</sup> Elsaesser thus concludes that festivals »created one of the most interesting public spheres available in the cultural field today.«<sup>31</sup>

Finally, Pierre Bourdieu's impact on film festival theory, with concepts such as cultural field, cultural/symbolic capital, prestige and value addition, and habitus, cannot be overestimated. As participants in the cultural field, film festivals contribute to the production of codes that create cultural unity and identity.<sup>32</sup> Given the competitive nature of festivals, they attribute social, cultural and symbolic capital through access to networks, the promotion of skills, and the bestowal of prestige on films and filmmakers.<sup>33</sup> The »hallmark of quality«<sup>34</sup> attributed to a film through its screening or award at a festival (highlighted on posters and other promotional material) may then be converted into economic capital when the film is picked up for distribution, or the filmmaker is offered production funds for their next film. This form of value attribution functions in a circuit of mutual legitimisation: as the film gains prestige through being screened at a festival, the festival gains prestige through screening artistically and economically successful films, which again

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28 Wong 2016, 83–84.

29 Wong 2016, 86.

30 Wong 2016, 87–89.

31 Elsaesser 2005c, 101.

32 Quenzel 2005, 73.

33 Elsaesser 2005c, 96–97.

34 De Valck 2016, 105.

increases its capacity to attract films, filmmakers, audiences, press and industry.<sup>35</sup> The prestige bestowed to a film (and vice versa, to the festival) affirms the festival's role as tastemaker, which functions through reward (selecting a film for screening) and gatekeeping (gently keeping out films that do not fit the artistic norms).<sup>36</sup> Festivals thus cultivate a particular habitus of aesthetic taste and reception, nurturing an audience appreciative of the kinds of films screened at the festival.<sup>37</sup>

Given the general absence of religion as a category of analysis in film studies, it is noteworthy that Elsaesser draws on religious elements to describe the process of value addition as a kind of »transubstantiation« with the Holy Spirit hovering over the discovery and consecration of a new masterpiece or auteur,<sup>38</sup> and draws attention to the ceremonial aspects of a festival (award ceremonies, exclusivity, scripts of behaviour, hierarchies of access, etc.) as well as its singularity as an event.<sup>39</sup> These religious parallels – whether explicit or not – further enhance the festival's role as tastemaker and the importance of the prestige it bestows.

### 3. Festivals of European film and their construction of Europe

Of the many film festivals annually held in Europe,<sup>40</sup> several focus specifically on European film. To my knowledge, these are Crossing Europe Film Festival Linz (Austria), ÉCU – The European Independent Film Festival Paris (France), Europäisches Filmfestival Göttingen (Germany), European Film Festival Palić (Serbia), Festival del cinema europeo (Lecce, Italy), Film Festival Cottbus – Festival of East European Cinema (Germany), goEast – Festival of Central and Eastern European Film Wiesbaden (Germany), Les Arc

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35 De Valck 2016, 105–106; Elsaesser 2005c, 101.

36 Elsaesser 2005c, 96.

37 De Valck 2016, 109–112.

38 Elsaesser 2005c, 99.

39 Elsaesser 2005c, 94–95; Dina Iordanova (2013, 8) notes that already André Bazin drew the comparison between the festival at Cannes and a religious rite or liturgy.

40 A number of festivals of European film are also held outside of Europe; however, their distinct objectives, organisation, and perspective on Europe would require a different theoretical framework, and so I will leave a comparative study to future investigations.

Film Festival (France), Scanorama Film Festival (multiple locations, Lithuania), Sevilla European Film Festival (Spain), Trieste Film Festival (Italy).<sup>41</sup> I draw in particular on their webpages to analyse their profile and understanding of »European film« as indicators of the image of Europe they seek to communicate.

The festivals vary somewhat in how they delimit their focus: while at ÉCU Paris, only half of its 14 sections are limited to European film, other festivals focus on a particular region (for example Central and Eastern European cinema in Wiesbaden, Cottbus and Trieste) or just one or two European countries per year (Göttingen). Most festivals combine a transnational European focus with the promotion of a particular region, such as Scanorama with its section for New Baltic Cinema in addition to its general »European« programme.

Generally speaking, the festivals pursue three main goals: first, the promotion of a European cinema characterised by the aesthetic traditions of auteur or art cinema; second, the emphasis on films dealing with socio-political issues – with these two goals echoing Everett’s tentative definition of European film.<sup>42</sup> A third objective is the festival’s activity in networking and training, reflecting Elsaesser’s evaluation of festivals as major players in the European film business.<sup>43</sup>

Focusing on the aesthetic aspect and networking, ÉCU Paris, for example, presents itself as »a unique platform for risk-taking storytellers« and emphasises »quality, innovation, and creativity in both form and content« of the films presented.<sup>44</sup> With its programme that highlights aesthetic criteria reminiscent of the auteur tradition (»bold and visionary filmmakers«)<sup>45</sup> and arthouse cinema (»new and thought-provoking cinematic creativity«),<sup>46</sup> the festival, like others, »aim[s] not only at a general audience appreciative of

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41 I do not presume that this list is exhaustive; however, these festivals are visible on an international scale and somewhat comparable in scope, competitions, and organisation. Seven of the festivals (Linz, Palić, Lecce, Cottbus, Les Arcs, Scanorama, Seville, and Trieste) are organised in the network Moving Images – Open Borders (Crossing Europe n. d., Moving Images | Open Borders).

42 Everett 2005a, 9.

43 Elsaesser 2005c, 83.

44 ÉCU n. d.

45 ÉCU n. d.

46 ÉCU n. d.

such challenging films« but also at »agents, talent scouts, production company representatives, distributors, and established producers, all of whom are searching for inspiring projects and raw talent.«<sup>47</sup> Thus the festival functions both as a tastemaker that habituates audiences to appreciate innovative and challenging films<sup>48</sup> and an active player in the industry, providing possibilities for networking with producers or distributors, or training and professionalisation opportunities for young filmmakers.

While also attentive to aesthetic criteria, the non-profit association, Art Promotion, that organises the festival in Lecce emphasises its commitment to socio-cultural values as well as regional and European identity promoted through the arts, and film in particular, such as »il dialogo interculturale; il diritto alla libertà di espressione; la valorizzazione della diversità culturale; l'educazione e la formazione dei giovani in ambito socio-culturale; la lotta al razzismo e alla xenofobia; la tutela e la valorizzazione del territorio e della tradizione pugliese, la promozione e la diffusione della cultura europea e mediterranea.«<sup>49</sup> The focus on social justice issues is also noticeable in the goEast festival, which partners with Renovabis (a Catholic charity in Germany) and Amnesty International.<sup>50</sup>

One way to gauge how a festival defines »European film« is their submission criteria. The Cottbus festival, for example, accepts films whose »producer or one of its co-producers and/or director resides in one of Europe's post-socialist countries (including all successor states of the Soviet Union) or its neighbouring European countries (Finland, Greece, Turkey), as well as feature films dealing thematically with this territory«,<sup>51</sup> favouring thus a geographical and political definition of Europe with regard to the residence (not ethnicity or nationality) of the main figures involved in a film's production and a film's theme and setting. Les Arcs (as well as others) also specifi-

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47 ÉCU n. d.

48 De Valck 2016, 109–112. goEast is one of the few festivals that mentions explicitly the inclusion of both experimental, arthouse and mainstream films (goEast n. d., About).

49 Festival del cinema europeo n. d.: »intercultural dialogue; the right of free expression; the appreciation of cultural diversity; the education and formation of young people in the socio-cultural field; the fight against racism and xenophobia; the protection and appreciation of the territory and tradition of Puglia, the promotion and spread of European and mediterranean culture« (my translation).

50 GoEast n. d., Partners.

51 Filmfestival Cottbus n. d.

cally includes Turkey and Russia, countries that are only partially located on the European continent, among the »European« films screened.<sup>52</sup>

While the festivals' definition of Europe is thus more than a little vague, many of them are quite clear about their »other«: ÉCU, for example, distinguishes the films in its programme from »commercial-hungry major studio projects«,<sup>53</sup> and the festival in Palić sees itself poised against the »globalizing power of cultural imperialism«, with European film resisting the tendencies of commodification and commercialisation at work elsewhere.<sup>54</sup> The festivals distinguish themselves thus from commercial (Hollywood) cinema as both a particular stylistic tradition (entertaining rather than challenging) and a capitalist system oriented towards economic profit.

This first overview of the festivals' profiles shows that the festivals held in Europe reflect the uncertainties around definitions of Europe by referring to Europe both in geographical, political or socio-cultural terms, although with a noticeable emphasis on the geographical understanding of Europe as a continent, with very elastic boundaries towards the east. It is worth noting that countries often considered as Europe's »others« (Turkey, Russia) are considered a part of Europe and included in the festivals as a matter of course. Echoing the debate around European cinema, they screen films characterised by the aesthetic tradition of innovative auteur or arthouse cinema, which thus may be seen to function as a shared European cultural tradition, and by their critical engagement with socio-political issues relevant to societies across Europe, reflecting »European values«<sup>55</sup> such as the commitment to freedom, dignity, solidarity and the appreciation of cultural diversity and intercultural encounter.

#### 4. Crossing Europe: A cinematic journey through Europe

A closer look at the Crossing Europe festival in Linz confirms these first impressions. I have chosen this festival because it is largely representative of festivals of European film in scope and profile, and because a sufficient

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52 Les Arcs n. d.

53 ÉCU n. d.

54 European Film Festival Palić n. d.

55 See for example the preamble of the Maastricht Treaty on European Union 1992; see also Baschiera/Di Chiara 2018, 244–245; Bottici/Challand 2013, 127; Quenzel 2005, 128.

amount of information (including an extensive archive of previous editions and media reviews) is available online.<sup>56</sup> For this analysis, I draw in particular on the self-presentation of the festival and its reports on previous editions. Excerpts from media reviews curated by the festival provide some insight into how it has been perceived by its audience.

Founded in 2004 by Christine Dollhofer and directed by her until 2021, the festival has developed from a regional festival to one of national importance in Austria, attracting also some degree of attention in international media (especially in Germany). Starting in 2004 with 143 films from 30 countries across 12 sections and attracting an audience of 9,000, the festival has steadily grown to reach an audience of 24,000 in 2019, with 149 films from 48 countries shown in 12 sections and an additional programme of 22 events with 140 industry guests.<sup>57</sup> With its focus on European film as well as sections that feature local filmmakers, the festival brings together the transnational and regional dimensions characteristic of European cinema, and European identity more in general.

The festival partners with a range of institutions and businesses on the European, national, regional and local level, most notably the Creative Europe – MEDIA sub-programme of the European Union, Austrian media partners, the Austrian federal ministry of art, culture, public services and sports, and other publicly funded cultural institutions in Europe, as well as various business partners.<sup>58</sup> It is interesting to note that the partnership with the MEDIA programme – the only link with an EU office or programme – is not highlighted in the festival's profile or visualised through the prominent placement of its logo. Also noticeable is the absence of other visual markers of the EU, such as the European flag, from the festival webpage: the festival logo emphasises the idea of »crossing« but does not visually express the idea of Europe (fig. 1).

With the festival's focus on »idiosyncratic, contemporary and socio-political auteur cinema from Europe« and its intended audience of »international film and press representatives and guests of the film industry [...] and the

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56 See the festival webpage at <http://crossingeurope.at/en> (accessed June 2, 2022).

57 The festival was cancelled in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic and ran at limited capacity in a hybrid edition in 2021.

58 Crossing Europe n. d., Partners and Sponsors.

# CROSSING EUROPE

Fig. 1: The logo of Crossing Europe.<sup>59</sup>

Austrian audience«,<sup>60</sup> Crossing Europe includes the three main objectives shared by festivals of European film: emphasis on auteur cinema as the specific aesthetic tradition of European filmmaking, concern with social questions relevant to Europe, and participation in the film industry. The festival functions as a tastemaker and bestower of prestige by »bringing new positions and developments in film art to a wider public [...] that, all too often and despite international festival success, have no place in cinemas for economic reasons, and giving them an audience.«<sup>61</sup> It also serves as a public sphere as it raises socio-political issues (expressed for example through a Social Awareness Award for a documentary), and promotes values such as openness and cultural diversity,<sup>62</sup> gender equality,<sup>63</sup> and environmental and climate protection.<sup>64</sup>

The European cinema presented at the festival is described primarily in terms of its diversity: it is »[m]eandering and fraying, inconsistent, contradictory, and really quite sexy.«<sup>65</sup> Nevertheless, two elements mark this diverse cinema: artistic creativity and innovation on the formal level, and attention to European issues and the European reality on the level of content or subject matter. The films are »aesthetically sophisticated«<sup>66</sup>, »artistic-eccentric«,<sup>67</sup> «[e]xperimental«<sup>68</sup> and references to European auteur cinema evoke a tradition of independent, creative filmmaking as a shared cultural tradition.

59 Available for download at <http://crossingeurope.at/en> (accessed June 2, 2022).

60 Crossing Europe n. d., About Us.

61 Crossing Europe n. d., About Us.

62 Crossing Europe n. d., Festival History 2019.

63 The unusually high number of films by women (50% in 2017), and focusing on women, is mentioned repeatedly in media responses; see Nora Bruckmüller, *Oberösterreichische Nachrichten*, quoted in Crossing Europe n. d., Media Response 2017.

64 Crossing Europe n. d., Green Event.

65 Markus Keuschnigg, *fm4.orf.at*, quoted in Crossing Europe n. d., Media Response 2011.

66 Stefan Grisseemann, *Profil*, quoted in Crossing Europe n. d., Festival History 2014.

67 Crossing Europe n. d., Festival History 2018.

68 Eva Pakisch, *Raiffeisenzeitung*, quoted in Crossing Europe n. d., Media Response 2011.

Through this innovative film language, the films deal with issues of concern to Europe, and thus represent, for some critics, the »face of contemporary Europe«<sup>69</sup> or »the state of Europe on the cinema screen«.<sup>70</sup> Reviews note specific topics of concern to contemporary Europe, such as migration, democracy, nationalisms, and quite in general, »the political and moral drama called Europe«.<sup>71</sup> The films are described as »politically aware«,<sup>72</sup> and the festival overall as a »socio-politically engaged international film-festival«.<sup>73</sup>

What, then, is the Europe that viewers experience in the »cinematic journey«<sup>74</sup> that the festival offers? Most prominent is again the geographical understanding of Europe as a continent, reaching »from Iceland to Calabria and from the Atlantic to the Urals«,<sup>75</sup> supported by the use of metaphors such as map or journey. As in other festivals of European film, Turkey and Russia, in spite of their discursive construction as Europe's others, are considered as part of the continent. The reach of European film even extends beyond the continent via co-productions with Brazil, Qatar, or the US. With this broad geographical scope, the festival seems to serve an integrating function by »bring[ing] countries from the edges of Europe into the center«,<sup>76</sup> both literally, as Austria is situated in Central Europe, and figuratively, into the centre of attention of the (European) film world.

Often conflated with Europe as a continent is Europe as a political entity, the EU, even though it is mentioned more rarely. One reviewer notes, for example, that »European film is shown in all its diversity and even in times in which the European Union has to deal with immense backlash, the festival still feels a political obligation to the continent.«<sup>77</sup> This sense of an EU in crisis is also noted by another reviewer who describes Europe as »a politically and morally ailing continent«.<sup>78</sup> Nevertheless, the festival is also seen to

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69 Maria Motter, fm4.orf.at, quoted in Crossing Europe n. d., Media Response 2019.

70 Markus Vorauer, Kirchenzeitung, quoted in Crossing Europe n. d., Media Response 2017.

71 Stefan Grisseemann, Profil, quoted in Crossing Europe n. d., Media Response 2017.

72 Stefan Grisseemann, Profil, quoted in Crossing Europe n. d., Festival History 2014.

73 Tiziana Aricò, 3sat Kulturzeit, quoted in Media Response 2014.

74 Maria Motter, fm4.orf.at, quoted in Crossing Europe n. d., Media Response 2019.

75 Crossing Europe n. d., Festival History 2018.

76 Magdalena Miedl, Salzburger Nachrichten, quoted in Crossing Europe n. d., Media Response 2017.

77 Oliver Stangl, ray film magazine, quoted in Crossing Europe n. d., Media Response 2019.

78 Stefan Grisseemann, Profil, quoted in Crossing Europe n. d., Media Response 2017.

communicate an optimistic view of Europe: »Europe appears young, strong, active and right at the heart of times.«<sup>79</sup>

The image of Europe is primarily characterised by (cultural) diversity, not to say heterogeneity: Europe is a »quilt«<sup>80</sup> or »puzzle«.<sup>81</sup> While recognising something like a »European cultural region with its imagined and actual communities«, a »homogeneous superstructure« should be avoided: »European means, in the best case, multiple sensibilities drawing from regional circumstances.«<sup>82</sup> The festival thus negotiates an awareness of a shared cultural tradition and shared social concerns with the appreciation of cultural and aesthetic diversity encompassed by the geographical-cultural entity, Europe, whose political dimension is not altogether absent but understated.

A closer look at the programming of Crossing Europe provides a sense of what these shared concerns of European societies are, and of the formal approaches taken to tell these stories. A thematic analysis of the synopses provided in the festival catalogues of the films in the main competition for feature films over the last ten years (2011–2019 and 2021) provides a first overview of prominent thematic clusters which is substantiated through the screening and more detailed interpretation of the eight winners (including special mentions) of the feature film competition of the last four years (2017–2019 and 2021).<sup>83</sup>

The festival films deal with a wide range of topics which can be clustered into three broad themes: family and relationships; crisis and conflict; and identity and belonging. Of course, some sub-themes fit with more than one cluster, and in addition, most films explore several themes from different clusters. These clusters thus serve primarily a heuristic function to create

79 Philipp von Lucke, Film & TV-Kameramann, quoted in Crossing Europe n. d., Media Response 2014.

80 Andrey Arnold, Die Presse; Maria Motter, fm4.orf.at, both quoted in Crossing Europe n. d., Media Response 2014.

81 Maria Motter, fm4.orf.at, quoted in Crossing Europe n. d., Media Response 2019.

82 Markus Keuschnigg, fm4.orf.at, quoted in Crossing Europe n. d., Media Response 2011.

83 These include: *Beginning* (winner 2021), *Oray* (winner 2019), *The Man Who Surprised Everyone* (*Tchelovek kotorij udivil vseh*, Natasha Merkulova/Aleksey Chupov, RU/EE/FR 2018; winner 2019), *Light as Feathers* (Rosanne Pel, NL 2018; special mention 2019), *Antonio One Two Three* (*António um dois três*, Leonardo Mouramateus, PT/BR 2017; winner 2018), *The Gulf* (*Körfez*, Emre Yeksan, TR/DE/GR 2017; special mention 2018), *Crater* (*Il cratere*, Silvia Luzi, Luca Bellino, IT 2017; special mention 2018), and *Quit Staring at My Plate* (*Ne gledaj mi u pijat*, Hana Jušić, HR/DK 2016; winner 2017).

some order in the diversity of topics, as they also reflect the themes and concerns in discourses of Europe and European filmmaking.

Issues related to family life are particularly prominent and range from external challenges posed to a family, for example through poverty, loss of employment, or socio-political tensions (e. g. in *Eat Sleep Die* [Äta Sova Dö, Gabriela Pichler, SE 2012]), or emerging from relationships within a family, between partners, parents and children, or among siblings, such as abusive relationships, co-dependency, illness or death of a family member, with their impact on the emotional and economic well-being of the families (e. g. *The Levelling* [Hope Dickson Leach, GB 2016]). Films dealing with family and other relationships of love, friendship or sex explore the human need for connection, communication and community, together with the potential threats that might shape them, and thus represent family and relationships as ambivalent, both prone to exploitation or abuse and as sources of support and affirmation.

This cluster of topics is present in most of the films screened for this study, particularly in *Quit Staring at My Plate* and *Light as Feathers*. In both films, the family represents an ambivalent space of support, love, and violence. In the Croatian film *Quit Staring at My Plate*, Marijana, the adult daughter, struggles to define her own place in life over against her oppressive, patriarchal father, her weak, disaffected mother, and a mentally disabled brother, with the responsibility as the breadwinner of the family resting heavily on her shoulders when the father is debilitated by a stroke. Moments of tenderness are rare and yet there is a sense of solidarity and mutual support among the family members. With her relationships outside of the family reduced to the bare minimum, Marijana searches for something like self-affirmation and autonomy in casual sexual encounters but ultimately does not dare – or need to? – break away from her family when she disembarks, in the middle of the road, from the bus that was to take her to a different life in Zagreb.

*Light as Feathers*, set in rural Poland, pursues a different take on family relationships by focusing on a teenage boy, Eryk, who rapes his girlfriend. Without absolving him from his responsibility, the film explores the everyday character of sexual violence and the conditions that enable it, in particular the co-dependency between the boy and his mother, which borders on the incestuous and inhibits the son from developing a sense of boundaries and responsible intimacy. The boy's incapacity to distinguish between gentleness

and force in interacting with his girlfriend is also reflected in how animals – cats, dogs, geese – are treated in the film with both care and casual violence.

This noticeable focus on familiar and intimate relationships reflects a desire for personal relationships, perhaps in particular in a context in which social institutions and the political community are no longer experienced as supporting the individual.<sup>84</sup> Thus the tensions in marriages, families and between lovers or friends in the films can also be read as a socio-political metaphor for the state of the societies the films are set in and, more broadly, the European context in which they are situated (e.g. in *Martesa* [*The Marriage*, Blertha Zeqiri, AL 2017]).

The second cluster of themes emphasises a sense of crisis, conflict and insecurity, reflected in a few films in their (post-)apocalyptic setting (e.g. *Fallow* [*Brak*, Laurent Van Lancker, BE 2015]). The crises and conflicts faced by protagonists are many: most significant are economic ones, the loss of employment or housing (as in *Irina* [Nadejda Koseva, BG 2018]); political tensions or social unrest (*Saf* [Ali Vatansever, RO/DE/TR 2018]); existential crises of illness or death (*Dying* [*Morir*, Fernando Franco, ES 2017]); as well as the experience of violence and/or crime, either as victims or perpetrators (noticeably, children and young adults figure strongly in these films, indicating a problematic lack of ethical structures that could guide their moral development, as in *Chrieg* [Simon Jaquemet, CH 2014]).

In *The Gulf* the crisis is environmental: a fire on a tanker results in a toxic odour that prompts those who can to leave the city, Izmir, that is slowly taken back by the mud of the gulf where it is built. Echoing the socio-political situation of living »in a period of slow decay«, as the director says,<sup>85</sup> the film also explores the existential crisis of its protagonist, Selim, who seems to have lost his meaning of life after his divorce. As his middle-class privileges become irrelevant in this apocalyptic situation (they no longer protect him from being beaten up by the police, for example),<sup>86</sup> Selim is increasingly drawn into the world of the lower class, who like him appear strangely unaffected by the noxious air, and seems to find a sense of belonging in their community.

84 This resonates with John Orr's (2004, 300–301) observation of disconnectedness as a key motif in contemporary European cinema.

85 Economou 2017.

86 As noted by Jessica King (2018) in her review of the film.



Fig. 2: Hope in the face of crisis? Selim (left) with others above Izmir. *The Gulf* (Emre Yeksan, TR/DE/GR 2017), film still, 1:45:46.<sup>87</sup>

While crisis is, of course, an important dramaturgical device in most plots, this thematic cluster indicates crisis, conflict and insecurity as a primary experience and concern in Europe, contradicting the ideal of Europe (especially of the EU) as promoting peace, freedom, justice, equality, stability and prosperity. Although the films show a Europe that is falling short of these ideals, they also evoke a sense of promise: *The Gulf* ends on an understated but hopeful note of serenity and peace as Selim and a motely group of people gather on a hill above the city (fig. 2).

The third cluster of topics relates to issues of identity, which also include individual and collective past and history, as well as the question of the purpose or meaning of one's life, reflecting the continued debate about what it is that characterises collective European identity, the historical memory that shapes it as well as the purpose that orients its future. A range of aspects of identity, faced in particular by young protagonists, appear across the films, from gender (a significant topic; e. g. in *Pari* [Siamak Etemadi, GR/FR/NE/BG 2020]) to sexuality (especially queer sexual identities; such as in *Radiant Sea* [*Lichtes Meer*, Stefan Butzmühlen, DE 2015]), ethnicity (often in the context of migration and the tensions between different cultures or traditions;

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87 Source: <https://vimeo.com/281059048> (accessed September 26, 2022).

e. g. in *What Will People Say?* [*Hva vil folk si?*, Iram Haq, NO/DE/SE 2017]), religion (*Djeca* [*Children of Sarajevo*, Aida Begić, BA/DE/FR/TR 2012]), class (especially lower/working class and middle class with their respective challenges; *Archipelago* [Joanna Hogg, GB 2010]), and to a limited degree, physical and mental ability (*Oasis* [*Oaza*, Ivan Ikić, RS/SI/NE/FR/BA 2020]). In several films, characters seem to experience a sense of aimlessness and seek meaning and purpose (e. g. *Lifelong* [*Hayatboyu*, Asli Özge, TR/DE/NE 2013]). Some protagonists attempt to deal with this question of identity and meaning by revisiting their past in order to understand their present (and perhaps future; e. g. in *Family Tour* [Liliana Torres, ES 2013]). More rarely (which is somewhat surprising given the importance of history in discourses about Europe), films engage the question of identity on the collective level, exploring the past of a society or nation (e. g. *Caracremada* [Lluís Galter, ES 2010]).

*The Man Who Surprised Everyone* and *Antonio One Two Three* focus on different sub-themes in this cluster. In *The Man Who Surprised Everyone*, set in Siberia, Egor is diagnosed with terminal cancer, and given that neither modern medicine nor shamanic rituals offer any hope, he is inspired by the folk tale of a drake who disguises himself as a female duck to escape Death. Like the drake, Egor dresses as a woman without offering any explanation in a kind of ritualistic silence. The village community reacts to his/her transgressive behaviour with exclusion – symbolised in frequent shots of fences marking the boundary between the community and the outsider (fig. 3) – and physical as well as sexual violence. Only eventually – yet even more significantly because she is still not given any explanation – does his wife accept Egor's new identity, and in the end, the effectiveness of Egor's mythical transformation with its sacrifices is affirmed when his tumor disappears. While the film critiques a society afraid of and reacting violently to otherness and diversity in particular with regard to gender identity, it also suggests that even in traditionally patriarchal societies, there are elements that encourage a more fluid understanding of identity, thus underlining the subversive power of mythologies.

*Antonio One Two Three* deals with the question of identity and meaning in a poetic way as Antonio meanders through his life, love relationships, and city (Lisbon) without a clear sense of direction. The film's non-linear treatment of time and narrative – spiralling, perhaps, through different times or



Fig. 3: Fences as markers of being an outsider. *The Man Who Surprised Everyone* (Natasha Merkulova/Aleksey Chupov, RU/EE/FR 2018), film still, 1:06:16.<sup>88</sup>

sequences of events, or representing time as synchronicity – suggests that the narrative of one's life is not a causal sequence of events with a clear connection between a past that shapes one's present and leads into a well-defined future. Its focus on performance and theatre indicates that perhaps all identity is performative, and reality only another version of theatre.

The films echo thus the struggles with identity and belonging, as well as experiences of exclusion and violence, that shape discourses about Europe, emphasising in their treatment of these questions the dignity of all persons, and diversity as a gift, not a problem. In this negotiation of identity and difference, these films, and cinema more broadly, play an essential role, as Thomas Elsaesser notes, because of »that capacity so unique to cinema, of seeing through the eyes of others into the mind of the self.«<sup>89</sup>

Formal elements are noted more rarely in the film synopses, yet both the few mentions present and the films screened for this study confirm the festival's focus on art or auteur films. Noticeable is a shared preference for realist filmmaking, yet with elements of formal abstraction or surrealism, which together create ambiguous, open texts requiring the engagement of viewers in their interpretation(s). The films reflect the European arthouse tradition in distinction from Hollywood cinema mentioned above: they show a preference for long takes, little camera movement and slow editing, complex yet elusive characters, and plots that are concerned with the exploration of

88 Accessed on Amazon Prime.

89 Elsaesser 2005a, 511.

dilemmas rather than their solution. Rather than offering an all-seeing perspective, they tend to emphasise the limitations of the viewer's position in front of the screen, for example through a frontal camera position during dialogue scenes or by using the off to create a sense of not-knowing in viewers and to allow characters the autonomy to move as if unrestrained by the frame. The resulting misalignment of sound and image can also express a socially subversive shift in attention, used very effectively in *The Gulf*, when in several scenes the camera focuses on secondary working-class characters (a server, maid or housekeeper) while the conversation among the middle-class protagonists – supposedly the centre of both social and narrative attention – continues in the off.

Close-ups or medium close-ups focus attention on a character or object through which the story is told, but their effect is ambiguous: they invite immersion into the story and identification with characters, but because the acting is mostly understated with minimal facial expressiveness, despite the visual closeness to a character, their feelings or psychological motivations are difficult to »read«. In addition, close-ups may result in a sense of disorientation because they make it hard to situate characters in space. Thus, somewhat paradoxically, the close-ups have the same effect as the more distanced camera position used in some films of refusing an immersive film experience and yet inviting viewers to explore and try to understand the characters. Frequent shots through doorways or windows as well as the motif of fences create a frame-within-the-frame which boxes the character in and emphasises a sense of separation, but at times also suggests that there might be other possibilities for them, beyond the frame. Given these framing preferences, the occasional totals are even more effective as they expand the horizon, for example for the protagonist in *Quit Staring at My Plate*, whose narrow life between work and family seems to open up with new possibilities in a total across the city and sea.

The realist, even documentary-like approach is emphasised by on-location shooting (especially noticeable in *Crater* where in the cramped spaces of the family home the camera seems to invade the personal space of the characters, reflecting the father's attempts to groom his daughter into a child star in the Neapolitan music scene without much regard for her own ambitions), hand-held camera, minimal additional lighting, and the somewhat bleached colours that also emphasise the not always picture-perfect reality

in which the protagonists live (especially in *Antonio One Two Three* and *Quit Staring at My Plate*, both of which are set in tourist destinations, Lisbon and the Croatian seaside town of Sibenik, yet focus on parts of the city tourists do not usually see). In addition, the use of non-professional actors and, in some cases (such as *Crater* and *Light as Feathers*), their participation in the development of the scripts blur the distinction between documentary and fiction without dissolving it.

However, the films do not pretend to simply show reality »as it is«, but their realist, observational style of filmmaking is combined with noticeable artifice. The films represent a reality that is very clearly constructed, their images are carefully chosen and sometimes designed like tableaux that have an independent value beyond just being a tiny part of a visual narrative – for example the concluding shot of a lemon tree in Antonio’s backyard, shot through the open door of his room in a beautiful arrangement of objects and colours (fig. 4) – and the restrained camera movement and slow editing focus attention in a meditative quality. In addition, the films sometimes include surreal elements – in *The Gulf*, for example, a turtle appears twice incongruously in a mall, contrasting the animal with the bright artificiality of the shopping centre – or use exaggerated, caricatured characters next to psychologically nuanced ones, as in *Quit Staring at My Plate*, where the director consciously uses the grotesque to temper the bleakness of the reality she shows.<sup>90</sup>

Through these formal elements, the films elude definitive interpretations: they show but do not explain, they observe but do not judge. Expositions are minimal, often leaving the viewer unsure for a while about characters or even what the film is about, causalities are unclear, psychological motivations are not explained, endings remain inconclusive. The films allow for multiple interpretations, and even demand them: because the film does not provide an explanation or evaluation, viewers have to engage with it, draw their own conclusions and take responsibility for them. And yet these conclusions will remain necessarily provisional because of the ambiguities of plot and characters.

In spite of the diversity of topics and formal approaches, the films screened at the festival thus reflect the two characteristics of European film mentioned above, a rootedness in the arthouse tradition of European filmmaking and a

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90 Jušić n. d.



Fig. 4: Still life with lemon tree. *Antonio One Two Three* (Leonardo Mouramateus, PT/BR 2017), film still, 1:34:15.<sup>91</sup>

focus on topics of concern to Europe, in particular questions of family and relationships, crises and conflicts, and identity and meaning. In their treatment of these issues, the films emphasise the perspective of those at the margins, either geographically, in films set at the margins of Europe, or socially, by focusing on protagonists experiencing social exclusion, economic hardships, or prejudice. With their formal emphasis on realism and open-ended narratives, the films encourage viewers to take responsibility with regard to the issues raised in a film and thus contribute to the promotion of values such as dignity, social justice, solidarity, diversity and the common good, which may be considered as shared »European« values.

In the next section, I will focus specifically on the role of religion in these images of Europe and the values promoted through the films.

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91 Accessed on Amazon Prime.

## 5. Religion in Europe's cinema: A close-up

The (relatively few) films whose synopses mention religion explicitly as a central plot element focus on various Christian denominations and Islam (with the noticeable absence of references to Judaism). At first glance, this might be taken as a reflection of discourses about Christianity as the root of European identity and values, and about Islam as Europe's threatening other. Chiara Bottici and Benoît Challand note this »biased and selective use that can be made of religion as a *positive* marker of an alleged European community by stressing a *negative* view of an other«. <sup>92</sup> However, as will be seen in the more detailed discussion below, the films screened at Crossing Europe complicate this neat dualism and instead show that either religious tradition has positive and problematic aspects, may provide a sense of belonging, identity and moral structure, or be the source of conflict or restraints that delimit an individual's agency.

Screening a cross section of films (winners and special mentions) for this study rather than a pre-selection of those focusing, according to the synopsis, on religion, allows one to notice another way in which religion is present, namely as an unmentioned background motif that functions as an element in the description of the characters' social and cultural context or as an implicit frame of reference. This second mode of religious presence reflects the mostly unconscious role that religions play today in the development of European culture, identity and value. This is the case, for example, in *Light as Feathers* where a casual moment of prayer before dinner and a maypole in the form of a cross signal the predominantly Catholic culture of Poland where the film is set, without making religion a prominent dramaturgical device. In fact, the director, Rosanne Pel, explicitly resists the religious interpretation of the story of guilt, responsibility and forgiveness she explores in her film: »Yes, that was a clear choice. I'm not religious, and I don't view forgiveness as an act of God that occurs outside of human actions. Instead, I see it as something that is only possible between human beings.« <sup>93</sup> Nevertheless, it is noticeable that in the final scene, just before Eryk meets the baby conceived when he raped his girlfriend – a scene which might, very cautiously, be described as the beginning of forgiveness – he is shown pausing at the

92 Bottici/Challand 2013, 163 (emphasis in the original).

93 Economou 2018.



Fig. 5: Forgiveness? Eryk pauses at the maypole. *Light as Feathers* (Rosanne Pel, NL 2018), film still, 1:21:21.<sup>94</sup>

cross-shaped maypole (fig. 5). This suggests a possible reading to me that is open to a transcendental dimension of forgiveness, even if its agents are clearly human, reflecting the Christian theological understanding of forgiveness at the intersection of the human and divine.

A closer analysis of two recent winners dealing with religion in an explicit way provides a better sense of how the films complicate discourses about the presence and role of religion in Europe.

### 5.1. *Beginning*: Religion as a source of oppression, inequality and violence

Dea Kulumbegashvili's feature debut opens with a long, static take from the back of a room apparently serving as a religious space. First a woman and some children enter, and then members of the congregation. The service begins with a sermon on the story of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, until it is interrupted when molotov cocktails are thrown into the room and the congregation desperately tries to get away from the fire. Several key elements are introduced in this first sequence: on the formal level, the prevalence of

<sup>94</sup> Source: courtesy of Family Affair Films (<https://www.familyaffairfilms.nl/>).

long, static takes and the use of the off, and on the thematic level, the theme of violence and religious discrimination (the community is identified implicitly as Jehovah's Witnesses), of punishment (the children are made to stand facing the wall because they got their clothes dirty), and of sacrifice, obedience and faith (the sermon). Yet the religious tensions as a source of this initial act of violence fade into the background and are mentioned only in passing in the rest of the film which instead focuses on Yana, the pastor's wife.

In fact, the director notes in an interview that the film is not about religion but about a woman's existence.<sup>95</sup> Religious elements and theological motifs nevertheless play a major role in it. Religious discrimination and violence serve as a frame for Yana's experience of being twice an outsider,<sup>96</sup> both as a member of the community, whose difference from the village population is visualised through the spatial distance of the prayer hall located somewhere out of town, and within her community: even though as the pastor's wife, she is at the centre of her community, welcomes the congregants and leads the religious instruction of the children preparing for baptism, there is also a sense of distance, dissatisfaction and alienation, emerging especially in her conversations with her husband.

The film traces Yana's vulnerability and exposure to patriarchal violence, most obviously by Alex (who might or might not be a detective investigating the attack), who harasses Yana at first verbally and then escalates to rape, as well as, less intensely, by other men: her husband, David, for whom she gave up her career as an actress and who »created« her, as he says, or, when she was a child, her father who threw mother and baby out of the house on a cold February night because Yana was crying too much.

Although patriarchal power and gendered violence are not directly religiously justified in the film, it still draws that connection with its emphasis on the theological themes of sin and punishment, good and evil, temptation and obedience. It is apparent that Yana has internalised these moral expectations also for her self-understanding as a wife and mother. Made palpable through the box-like Academy ratio of the film, she is locked in by religious and her own gender role expectations and the fatal progression from temptation to guilt and punishment.<sup>97</sup> Given this frame of understanding,

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95 Romney 2021.

96 Romney 2021.

97 Girish 2021.

it seems unavoidable that when David is sent a recording of Alex harassing Yana, he is angry at her, not Alex, for failing his expectations, and her only reaction is to ask for punishment. Forgiveness does not seem to be a possibility, neither on the religious nor the personal level: while David wants to forgive Yana (even though one might well argue that it is not she who needs to be forgiven), Yana resigns: »You won't be able to.« Thus the only way out seems to be a sacrifice as the ultimate act of faith, obedience and punishment, closing the circle to the opening scene with the sermon about Abraham and Isaac:<sup>98</sup> calmly, Yana prepares a smoothie, adds a bottle of pills to it, and gives it to her son, whose innocence had been stressed before through shots of him sleeping in white night clothes. However, the film does not end with this sacrifice but opens up a space of perhaps divine justice or transformation when in the enigmatic concluding scene, Alex is shown lying down on a sandy surface cracked by dryness, and – in contrast to the otherwise realistic even if stylised form of the film – slowly turns into sand and then trickles into the ground until only a very small heap of sand is left of him.

Not only the ending but the film as a whole is ambiguous and inconclusive, with gaps and uncertainties created through the narrative as well as its visual form: often, it is difficult to identify the characters in a scene because of low lighting or the framing, with things happening in the off but not shown or explained. According to the director,<sup>99</sup> this reflects the experience of not-knowing that marks everyday life, but it also creates a sense of mystery that invites viewers into the film, to engage with the ethical and theological problems it poses and negotiate values such as gender equality, justice and religious tolerance with its story of the internalisation of a patriarchal gender order, punitive theology and unmotivated violence. The film is also challenging on an aesthetic level with its extremely slow rhythm and visual form. The long, static take of the rape scene, even though filmed at a distance, is hard to bear, perhaps even harder because of the contrast between the brutality of what is happening and the beauty of the river where it happens, with purple flowers standing out in the foreground in the otherwise blueish-dark image. And yet with its slow rhythm, the film also develops a sort of meditative power, culminating in a six-minute shot of Yana, lying unmoving on the ground in a forest or park, when diegetic elements such

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98 Schenk n. d.

99 Romney 2021.

as her son asking what she's doing or the sounds of birds slowly fade away leaving only the image of her still face shot from above, perfectly centred in the frame, exuding – at least to me – a sense of calm serenity. Thus the film functions, on an experiential and intellectual level, as a meditation on existence and its fragility and an exploration of the social and religious conditions that may exacerbate this fragility or protect it.

Although – or perhaps because – as a Georgian (and French) production by a Georgian director and set in Georgia, the film is situated at the geographical margins of Europe, it participates in the discourse about Europe in several ways. Most remarkable, perhaps, is the small European flag – the only time a visual symbol of the EU appeared in any of the European films screened for this study – placed on the desk of the local chief of police (fig. 6) which appears out of place given that Georgia is not a member state (although it submitted its application for membership in spring 2022, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine).

In addition, the director explicitly discusses her understanding of the role of religion in European culture in the context of her film:

In contemporary Western society, most of us tend to think that we're not religious at all. But I think European culture is based on the Christian religion, it still cannot exist without it, because there's so much – our morals, our understanding of good and evil, how we relate to life. At the same time, it's irrelevant, because there is no one who requires [Yana's] sacrifice, there is no one who will stop her when she performs the act of sacrifice.<sup>100</sup>

As the film affirms the importance of religion as a source of values, identity and community for Europe, it also emphasises the problematic role of religion in legitimising inequality, alienation and violence. Implicitly, thus, the film seems to suggest that a secular frame of reference might be more beneficial to individuals, especially to women as they negotiate their identity and existence in a world still marked by (also religiously justified) patriarchy and violence. And yet, oppressive morality is not all there is to religion: with its meditative character – in particular in the long static take of

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100 Romney 2021.



Fig. 6: Visualising the EU. *Beginning* (Dea Kulumbegashvili, GE/FR 2020), film still, 1:36:33.<sup>101</sup>

Yana's face, which the director herself describes as »ecstatic«<sup>102</sup> – the film also acknowledges the importance of spiritual experiences in human existence.

## 5.2. *Oray*: Religion as a source of identity, community and structure

In Mehmet Akif Büyükatalay's feature debut, *Oray*, the themes of otherness, religious morality and gender roles are also prominent, but here, religion plays a different role in negotiating them. Islam is one of the markers of otherness<sup>103</sup> of the protagonist and his family and friends, all with a migration background among the non-Muslim majority of Germany, but here, it primarily provides a sense of belonging, community and orientation for the protagonist, Oray. In spite of the image of an uncompromising Islam presented in the opening sequence – Oray's video testimonial of his conversion to piety

101 Accessed on Amazon Prime.

102 Romney 2021.

103 Interestingly, the director mentions in an interview (Caruso 2020) that Oray's experience of (religious) otherness resonated also with a viewer who is a Jehovah's Witness, echoing Yana's experience in *Beginning*.

in prison and the support his faith has given him since then – the film offers a nuanced representation of Islam, not as »pure doctrine« but as continuously and variously interpreted both by religious »specialists« and, with a generous dose of self-irony, by other characters as they negotiate their religious commitments with other aspects of their lives.<sup>104</sup> The film presents a complex picture of the migrant community through its representation of Islam as a plural tradition and by including both religious and secular characters, showing their close relationships (most prominently between the pious Oray and his secular wife Burcu) and potential sources of conflict. One such conflict – the one that sets the film’s narrative in motion – is Oray’s pronouncement of *talaq* in a fit of temper, which in a strict interpretation of Islamic law means divorce, a requirement that Oray has to negotiate with the fact that he and his wife are still in love with each other. Refreshingly, the film thus disrupts two expectations about Muslim migrant characters in film, their representation as radicalised fanatics, and their representation as victims: one of Oray’s friends promises, »I’ll be the first Turkish chancellor«, jokingly, but also with a sense of rightful belonging in German society.

As Oray attempts to live up to religious requirements by separating from his wife and establishing a new life for himself in Cologne, finding an apartment and work and joining a mosque, the film explores questions of religious, cultural and gender identity, community, and otherness. Oray’s self-description as a »gypsy with Macedonian-Ottoman roots« ironises the question of European identity, referencing a marginalised region of Europe (Macedonia) and Alexander the Great’s »proto-European« empire, together with Europe’s »other«, the Muslim Ottoman empire, and Sinti and Roma, next to Jews the quintessential European »other within«. Religion, ethnicity and culture are perhaps the most prominent aspects of identity explored in the film through its use of language (characters often mix German, Arabic phrases and Turkish or comment on each other’s accents), significant objects (such as a Turkish flag or decorative oriental rugs) or practices (drinking tea rather than alcohol). But the film also examines gender identity, in particular masculinity, which is represented as aggressive, forceful and loud, but also quite fragile, in some contrast to the female characters in the film which, although overall secondary given its focus on Oray, are strong and self-confident. The film

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104 Buder n. d.



Fig. 7: Playing with foreground/background and shifts in focus express the dynamics between Oray and Bilal. *Oray* (Mehmet Akif Büyükcatalay, DE 2019), film still, 53:42.<sup>105</sup>

also complicates the either/or of heteronormative gender roles by intentionally depicting Oray's friendships with other men in a nearly homoerotic way as intimate and affectionate, not replacing but complementing the heterosexual intimacy between Oray and Burcu.<sup>106</sup>

In Oray's struggles over identity, his religious community plays a major role by offering emotional and practical support, as well as providing moral guidelines and a sense of direction and meaning. Oray does not only benefit from this himself as he states in his testimonial video but also extends the same kind of support to others when he brings a young petty thief, Ebu, into the fold of his mosque. The sense of community provided by shared faith even crosses ethnic boundaries when Oray and Burcu celebrate Eid with Ebu's family. Yet the film also shows that this sense of community is precarious. A very well-executed scene shows the dynamics of jealousy between Oray and the imam of his mosque, Bilal, when they greet other congregants after the service, with the camera first following Oray and then resting on him in the foreground as he continues to hug and joke with the others, while Bilal in his white traditional shirt remains alone, a small, lonely figure in the background (fig. 7). And not long after this moment at

105 Source: courtesy of filmfaust GmbH (<https://filmfaust.org/>).

106 Caruso 2020.

the height of Oray's popularity and new-found stature in life, things begin to unravel around him, shown in a sequence of relatively short scenes that have him lose his job, hide from his landlord because he can't make rent, steal food, and betray his values when he drinks and smokes dope with his secular friends, finally falling apart crying.

Given that the camera tends to stay close to Oray, the one total towards the end, when Oray had an accident on his way back to Burcu and is shown as a small figure in a snowy field, creates a sense of isolation and loneliness. Although viewers do not know it, it seems as if he decides to start over in that moment: the next cut takes us back to the mosque and a conversation between Oray and Bilal where they admit their respective short-comings, Bilal extends Islam's promise of a new start, and Oray is welcomed back into the community as they move to the other room to pray together with the others.

The film's nuanced approach, together with its realistic style (limiting the use of additional lighting, shooting on location, and working with lay as well as professional actors), gives it a sense of »authenticity« as it deals with the negotiation of multiple identities, experiences of otherness and belonging, and the role that religion can play in this by providing structures and community. The »European« character of the film on the thematic level with issues of migration, identity, the encounter of different traditions and religions, the search for belonging and a moral framework, is echoed on the formal level, as the director explicitly situates himself in a European tradition of auteur filmmakers, citing the Dardenne brothers, Fassbinder, and Romanian cinema as influences and singling out Pasolini as a »role model« with his realist, aesthetic and political filmmaking.<sup>107</sup> In this European space, where identity is negotiated in the encounter between different cultures, religious and secular worldviews, Islam is presented as one – but not the only – source of community, identity and values and as a living tradition that is continuously developed by its adherents in the context of their lifeworlds.

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107 Caruso 2020.

## 6. In conclusion

Unsurprisingly, this study of festivals of European film as a space where ideas of Europe are negotiated and discussed does not result in a clear image of Europe. The festivals, in particular Crossing Europe and the films screened there, represent a Europe marked by complexity, with elastic geographical boundaries and a range of issues at stake. In the thematic and formal diversity of European films, auteur or arthouse cinema appears as a common reference point, as an aesthetic style and a socio-politically committed tradition of filmmaking that directors draw on to engage with the larger issues of concern to Europe today by way of close attention to clearly situated, personal stories. The films' treatments of questions of family and relationship, experiences of crisis and conflict, and the search for identity, community and meaning, emphasise values of solidarity, justice, respect for diversity, dignity and equality, especially of those at the margins of society. The image of Europe presented is, thus, one of expansive inclusivity – even of those »others« like Russia or Turkey – appreciation of diversity, and concern for social justice.

In these filmic explorations of life in Europe today, religion – while not a prominent theme – appears in two ways, as a central plot element and a background element. When central to the plot, religious traditions are depicted ambiguously as both a source of conflict, exclusion and discrimination, and a source of community, identity and moral compass. And even when present as a background element, religion serves as an indirect frame of reference with its historical impact on the development of norms and values, and especially the social justice traditions of religious communities that resonate with the films' concerns with solidarity, justice and dignity.

The presence of religion in the public sphere of the film festival thus complicates discourses about the role of religion in Europe and European identity in two ways. First, the films' depiction of religious traditions as central to the lives of the characters or as an important if implicit frame of reference for values and social justice indicates that the secularisation narrative of superstitious religion superseded by objective rationality in the Enlightenment, which implicitly shapes official representations of Europe,<sup>108</sup> is not sufficient to capture the role that religion plays in the lived reality of Europe

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108 Bottici/Challand (2013, 151–153) note that religion appears only once in the relevant treaties of the EU.

today. Second, the representations of both positive and negative elements across religious traditions that may both empower or oppress, create injustice or promote equality, contributes to the dissolution of the dualism of »good« Christianity and »bad« Islam. Religions are shown to be complex and not always coherent, with teachings, practices and affective dimensions that impact the lives of individuals in different ways. As living traditions, they themselves change in the encounters with diverse worldviews and lifeworlds, and as *Oray* shows, not only religious »specialists« but all believers play a role in these developments. While there is much to be criticised in religious traditions – as in *Beginning* – the films indicate that is important to take seriously the presence and functions of religions in Europe today. The festivals thus provide a public space where religions are able to add their voice to discourses about Europe, and are challenged themselves by other voices.

## Filmography

- Antonio One Two Three* (*António um dois três*, Leonardo Mouramateus, PT/BR 2017).  
*Archipelago* (Joanna Hogg, GB 2010).  
*Before Sunset* (Richard Linklater, US 2004).  
*Beginning* (*Dasatskisi*, Dea Kulumbegashvili, GE/FR 2020).  
*Caracremada* (Lluís Galter, ES 2010).  
*Chrieg* (Simon Jaquemet, CH 2014).  
*Crater* (*Il cratere*, Silvia Luzi, Luca Bellino, IT 2017).  
*Der Schuh des Manitu* (Michael Herbig, DE/SP 2001).  
*Djeca* (*Children of Sarajevo*, Aida Begić, BA/DE/FR/TR 2012).  
*Dying* (*Morir*, Fernando Franco, ES 2017).  
*Eat Sleep Die* (*Åta Sova Dö*, Gabriela Pichler, SE 2012).  
*Fallow* (*Brak*, Laurent Van Lancker, BE 2015).  
*Family Tour* (Liliana Torres, ES 2013).  
*Irina* (Nadejda Koseva, BG 2018).  
*Lifelong* (*Hayatboyu*, Aslı Özge, TR/DE/NE 2013).  
*Light as Feathers* (Rosanne Pel, NL 2018).  
*Martesa* (*The Marriage*, Blerita Zeqiri, AL 2017).  
*Oasis* (*Oaza*, Ivan Ikić, RS/SI/NE/FR/BA 2020).  
*Oray* (Mehmet Akif Büyükcatalay, DE 2019).  
*Pari* (Siamak Etemadi, GR/FR/NE/BG 2020).  
*Quit Staring at My Plate* (*Ne gledaj mi u pijat*, Hana Jušić, HR/DK 2016).  
*Radiant Sea* (*Lichtes Meer*, Stefan Butzmühlen, DE 2015).

- Saf* (Ali Vatansever, RO/DE/TR 2018).  
*The Gulf* (Körfez, Emre Yeksan, TR/DE/GR 2017).  
*The Levelling* (Hope Dickson Leach, GB 2016).  
*The Man Who Surprised Everyone* (*Tchelovek kotorij udivil vseh*, Natasha Merkulova/  
Aleksy Chupov, RU/EE/FR 2018).  
*What Will People Say?* (*Hva vil folk si?*, Iram Haq, NO/DE/SE 2017).

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