Film Festivals And Their New Realities

Six Essays on the Transformation of (Short) Film Culture in Europe

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The Age of Uncertainty

Film festivals have always been more than just places to watch films. They are **laboratories of the possible, where art, politics, and society collide**—sometimes in celebration, sometimes in conflict. But what happens when the ground beneath them begins to shift? When cinemas vanish from cityscapes, when algorithms dictate attention spans, when the very idea of a "public" fractures into polarised echo chambers? And what does it mean to curate, to gather, to resist when the old rules no longer apply?

These are the questions that animated **"Film Festivals And Their New Realities"**, a six-part panel series hosted by the European Short Film Network (ESFN) across festivals in Nijmegen (NL), Oberhausen (DE), Lisbon (PT), Vienna (AT), Zagreb (HR), and Uppsala (SE). Each event zoomed in on a different fault line: the ethics of AI in animation, the responsibility of institutions in repressive times, the urgent need to redefine impact beyond box-office logic. The conversations were sometimes uncomfortable, but always necessary—**because festivals, like the films they champion, are not neutral**. They are shaped by the same forces they seek to interrogate.

This reader gathers six essays commissioned by Talking Shorts, written in response to these panels. They are not transcripts, but provocations—**critical reflections that embrace contradiction, skepticism, and even frustration**. Because the festival landscape today is less about easy answers and more about asking the right questions: How do we programme courageously when censorship looms? What does community mean when the cinema down the street is now a luxury apartment? And why do we still measure success in numbers, when the most transformative moments—debates, chance encounters, quiet revelations—happen off the spreadsheet?

The texts you'll find here resist the safety of consensus. They were written by observers who were free to challenge the festivals that hosted them, the formats that framed the debates, and even the premises of the discussions themselves. If festivals are to remain relevant, resilient, and radical, they must welcome dissent, not just the applause. **So consider this reader an invitation to argue**. To steal ideas. To disagree. And if you leave with more questions than answers? Good. That's where the next panel should begin. **Let's keep the debate alive**.

Daniel Hadenius-Ebner
for the European Short Film Network

Content

1.

The Essays

What is Thy Name? Of Oversights, Lapses, and Deliberate Missteps

Reflections on the Panel Discussion "Programming in Times of Oppression"
Go Short, 4 April 2025

by Ren Scateni

Not every film festival is created equal. Whereas the most prominent—or "A-list" festivals, as they are often referred to in the trade—attract not only professionals but also local audiences, short film festivals generally play in a very different arena. In Europe, those who fail to execute successful outreach strategies—whether because of location, purpose, or strategic aims—end up tallying a high number of industry passholders. Programming decisions across screenings and peripheral events are often influenced accordingly. Despite an overall strategy noticeably aimed at boosting local awareness and box office figures—resulting, during the festival dates, in a buzzing atmosphere around the Mariënburg Chapel in Nijmegen—Go Short's Industry Programme was once again quite robust in its 17th edition this year.

Nested within a programme predominantly catered to a disparate array of makers and professionals—mostly producers and screenwriters—and showing a decisive focus on practical advice on film development, networking, commissioning, and casting, the panel discussion "Programming in Times of Oppression" sounds odd. With programmers and curators not being the festival's industry target audience, the panel's name begs the question: who is this session for? The **event's description on the Go Short website** reads as an intriguing mix of pragmatic and mysterious. It opens with a couple of generalised introductory sentences that hint rather succinctly at the dire circumstances in which filmmakers operate nowadays. The usual suspects—authoritarianism, oppression, and censorship—are predictably invoked. After that, a string of relevant questions follows:

When showing films of these creators [and you may wonder, as I did, who such creators are] *to a larger audience, what are the expectations of film festivals to ensure that filmmakers are protected? How can film festivals ensure that a safe space is created for filmmakers to showcase their films, especially when they are at odds with repressive regimes? And when should festivals take a step back?*

This promises to be quite a stimulating conversation, **tackling some of the most pressing ethical conundrums affecting a rather spineless film industry** rife with double standards, vapid justifications, and weakness of will. I keep on reading the blurb, eager to learn the names of the speakers, but alas, I find none. The copy says: *Join us in* [read: for a] *panel discussion on* "Programming in Times of Oppression", *with three filmmakers whose work challenges censorship and gives a voice to the otherwise voiceless*. Over the days leading up to the talk, I often return to the Go Short website, hoping to see names revealed. As it's often customary in fast-paced festival environments, some details slip through the cracks, and speakers' names are frequently a last-minute addition to an otherwise somewhat fully-formed lineup.

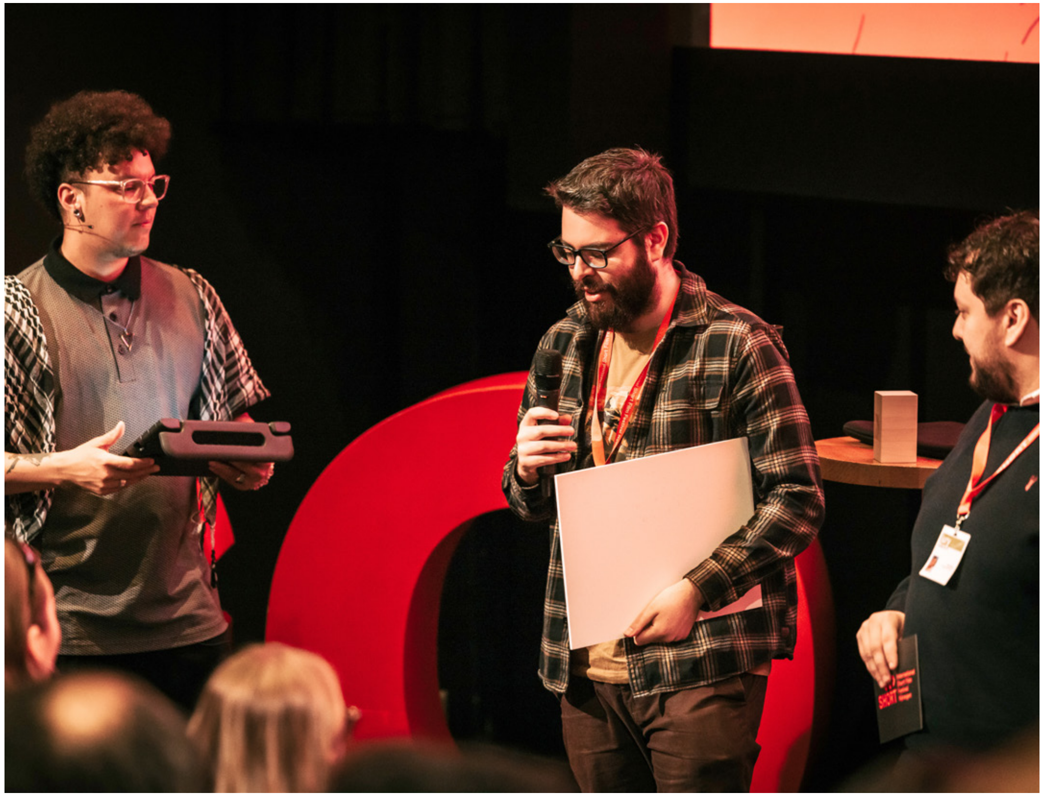
Intriguingly, however, the identities of the speakers are revealed in the Speaker Information Booklet, a document circulated only among accredited professionals, but I will find this out only after the festival has already ended. In hindsight, this peculiarity warrants a question, still. Why purge their names from the public-facing website but leave them in a document only available to the industry? Was this a safeguarding measure? And if so, who exactly is being protected here—and from what? On the Go Short website, a name eventually pops up, and it's that of the moderator: Luuk Heezen. As I learn from his website, he's a freelance cultural presenter, podcaster, and video maker. A curious choice.

Tackling some of the most pressing ethical conundrums affecting a rather spineless film industry

On Boycotting Festivals and Voicing Dissent

On the day of the talk, I make my way to the venue. LUX Studio, an anonymous yet casually inviting multi-purpose room with a bar area (which I curiously have never really seen in operation over my three consecutive years attending the festival, but have always liked the look of). I take a seat, and I'm pleased to see two very familiar faces in the speakers' corner: Hoda Taheri and Theo Panagopoulos. No traces of the third filmmaker, and no mention of their absence. Was there a typo in the blurb? Who knows.

Hoda and Theo, though, are excellent choices. Both are inspired speakers and part of this year's festival juries (Hoda sits on the European Jury, Theo on the Dutch & New Arrivals)—a great example of strategic planning for festivals wanting to make the most of their guests' stay. Hoda Taheri is an Iranian filmmaker and artist based in Berlin, whose *Mother Trilogy—Mother Prays All Day Long* (2022), *As If Mother Cried That Night* (2023), and *Mother Is a Natural Sinner* (2024)—premiered at the Locarno Film Festival over three consecutive years and was later screened at numerous other festivals (the first instalment of the trilogy screened in the European Competition at Go Short in 2023). Theo Panagopoulos is a Greek-Lebanese-Palestinian filmmaker and researcher based in Scotland. His most recent film, *The Flowers Stand Silently*, *Witnessing*, has won the Best Short Documentary Award at IDFA 2024, Best Short Film Grand Jury Prize at Sundance 2025, and was nominated for a BAFTA. Theo's film—a poignant video essay reclaiming and reframing the gaze of the white coloniser and offering a commentary on the erasure of Palestinian lives—is also playing in the European Competition at Go Short.



Theo Panagopoulos
at Go Short
© Yori Craenmehr

The lineup is now complete: two filmmakers in conversation moderated by a freelance presenter. No programmers, neither from Go Short nor any other film festival, are officially invited to share their views in a panel discussion titled "Programming in Times of Oppression". Once again, I ask myself: who is this session for?

1.A

In front of the holding slide detailing the event, someone else is sitting next to Hoda and Theo, but it's not Luuk. Emma Broholm, Head of Industry at Go Short, introduces herself and tells us that Luuk got the time mixed up and is running late. Luckily, she has the questions—Emma reassures us—so she will fill in Luuk's shoes until he finally arrives. The questions, as I would later learn, were in fact shared with the panellists ahead of time. As much as this is usually a nice courtesy gesture in preparation for a panel conversation, I'm surprised to hear that the festival also asked the speakers to reply in writing—quite a lot of labour for an unpaid opportunity. I can't help but wonder if this is common practice for all talks at Go Short, or if this is perhaps another safeguarding measure. Vetting answers to ensure people's safety? Surely I'm overthinking, but after most festivals turned a blind eye to Israel's bloodlust genocidal campaign against Palestinians, while some others began dressing up as democratic spaces, open to constructive, multilateral dialogue as long as opinions don't infringe on the unchallengeable freedom of Israel to defend itself at all costs, one can't help but be a little paranoid.
Over the next hour, the conversation unfolds smoothly. Thanks to Luuk's delay—who, at this point, still hasn't arrived—questions are encouraged from the floor quite early on, transforming an event arguably planned to be more structured and contained into a free-flowing and inspiring conversation, organically blurring the boundaries between speakers and audience. As expected, many of the most relevant and vital issues affecting the programming world in these increasingly stifling yet numbing times are raised by the eager attendees. After being asked if the content of his work ever brought him into trouble, Theo shares about his active boycotting of German festivals. Echoing the call of **Strike Germany** to withhold labour and presence from German cultural institutions, Theo admits that he's striking Germany because he "felt that many of the bigger festivals there are openly disrespectful to Palestinian artists." He continues, **"as a filmmaker, I also have agency in how I share my film and what it means to share it in different spaces."**

> **"As a filmmaker, I also have agency in how I share my film and what it means to share it in different spaces."**
>
> Theo Panagopoulos

An ethical stance that's shared by many other artists who, in recent years, have continuously withdrawn their films—if not abstained from submitting them altogether—from German festivals, Berlinale being the most egregious example of an institution parading double standards until eventually aligning with the country's autocratic Staatsräson. This, of course, doesn't necessarily mean that all the programmers and cultural workers employed by the Berlinale share in the organisation's political positioning, but voicing dissent in institutional environments is arduous. When discussing Europe's volatile and bureaucratically oppressive atmosphere, which Hoda compares to the otherwise physical nature of political oppression in Iran, she tells us about a friend of hers—a Berlinale Forum programmer—who allegedly had to deal with the festival's unspoken programming guidelines. Nobody was instructed to avoid selecting a Palestinian film, but it had been understood that such a film wouldn't be welcomed at this year's Berlinale.

Moral Duty and Appropriate Care

Things, however, are more complicated, especially when it comes to navigating a murky festival landscape for those filmmakers who care about not only prestigious laurels but also, and more importantly, a festival's integrity. It all really boils down to the language they use in press releases and social media posts. In times when media misconstruct, manipulate, and distort the truth in their biased reporting on the genocide in Palestine, filmmakers can be more sensitive to specific words used by festivals in their official communications, the most common instance being the inability to call the ongoing genocide a genocide, and instead referring to it as "the situation in Gaza", or "a war". If festivals continue to tiptoe around language, then, of course, they should be prepared for further scrutiny, such as checking who funds or sponsors them, as well as the moral pedigree of their commercial partners.

> **"I do feel that it's the festival's responsibility to be aware of their language"**
>
> Theo Panagopoulos

Nevertheless, language also matters when it comes to how filmmakers—and their work—are described. **"I do feel that it's the festival's responsibility to be aware of their language,"** Theo comments. "It's not my responsibility to tell the festival how to say things, how to frame things, but if the festival comes to me to check, maybe that's something that would be beneficial. At the same time, if they frame things in a specific way, then I know what the priorities of the festival are." Programmers—and by extension festivals—are then expected to be aware of the correct language to use to describe films, having spent so much time with them and having pledged to fulfill their moral duty to treat all works with the appropriate care.

But **the balance between respectful inclusion and tokenism is a delicate one to strike**, and this is where labels and identity come into play. Strikingly, Hoda recounts feeling overall politically irrelevant before coming to Germany, and then, once there, she's suddenly attached various labels—Iranian, refugee, woman, queer—which almost rewrote Hoda's understanding of herself. "A friend once told me that I was sitting on a gold mine," she continues. "Okay then, I thought, let me cash out! But the problem is that when I'm in the same competition with a straight German man, I'm there because I'm a woman, refugee, and so on, and he's there because he's pure talent. It's a double-edged sword." In cultural contexts, where most of the workforce is a white, cis, privileged monolith, identity ultimately is not so much related to what you identify with; rather, it's about your degree of marginalisation against the dominant demographic. How your identity is used—uplifted, platformed, weaponised, trampled over—is in the hands of festivals and other cultural organisations. There's only so much you can control.

The balance between respectful inclusion and tokenism is a delicate one to strike

Similarly, artists can hardly exert control on what's deemed political. "I never decide, for example, let's make a political film," Hoda remarks. "I always make very personal films, which can also be read on another level because as soon as you're labeled as an Iranian woman and work with certain topics like I do, everything becomes political. It's unavoidable." **The very notion of political films is indeed a deeply arbitrary one, and it's often tied to issues of control. Who is manufacturing the narrative?** The conversation, as Theo suggests, should be more "about who is the oppressor, rather than who we are and what our work is about."

Allyship and Safeguarding Protocols

Listening to the discussion unfold, I was reminded of the silence of most festivals in the short film circuit after October 2023, and of the few vacuous, oblique statements in support of Palestine that followed.

The very notion of political films is indeed a deeply arbitrary one, and it's often tied to issues of control. Who is manufacturing the narrative?

1.A

Most of those festivals, however, have since gone on to capitalise on Palestinian films to show a watered-down version of solidarity that's as palatable to funders as much as it is cowardly. It's no surprise, then, that those same festivals lack the appropriate systems to be safe spaces. Lumping Palestinian films together—or any other group of works by a marginalised community—or giving them a slot in a somewhat curated competition programme doesn't necessarily signal allyship, or make the festival safe for minorities. **Appropriate safeguarding protocols should be an integral part of any business plan, not an afterthought** or a collateral measure, and not a vehicle for producing yet another panel discussion that results in no direct action. What is really the point of this talk when, after all the valuable points discussed by Hoda, Theo, and the audience, there was no member of the Go Short programme team to at least listen, if not engage and respond?

On Saturday night, this year's award winners are announced during the award ceremony. *The Flowers Stand Silently, Witnessing* wins Best European Documentary and is also nominated for the European Film Awards. The Go Short Instagram account posts a group picture of the awardees to congratulate them, and Theo's film is described, simply, as "a poetic act of memory and resistance." Only the previous day, when discussing language in the context of festivals, Theo commented, "I know instantly when something is very carefully framed, if it's very progressive, or if it's not. Language is very important, especially when describing the film. And most people won't see it, but they will see the synopsis or the description as well." Let's all bear witness then to the oversights, the lapses, the deliberate missteps. **In times of oppression, we should dare to speak the name of Palestine.**

In times of oppression, we should dare to speak the name of Palestine.

1.B

Can Political and Artistic Communication Truly Be Separated?

Reflections on the Panel Discussion “Ideology Machines”
Internationale Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen, 2 May 2025

by Yun-hua Chen

Can institutions ever truly escape politics? That question lingered in the room long after the panel “Ideology Machines” concluded at this year’s 71st Oberhausen International Short Film Festival. As audience members lined up at the mic, some trembling with anger, others speaking with urgency or exasperation, it became clear that the panel had touched a raw nerve. What was expected to be a theoretical exchange between a philosopher and a film scholar quickly unravelled into something far more visceral: a clash of worldviews, a reckoning with the role of power in culture, and **a live demonstration of just how charged the conversation around ideology and artistic autonomy has become**. A room full of well-reflected friction, justified contradiction, and unresolvable questions—it was the audience who filled the space with a force to be reckoned with. And perhaps that, more than anything, is its most important outcome.

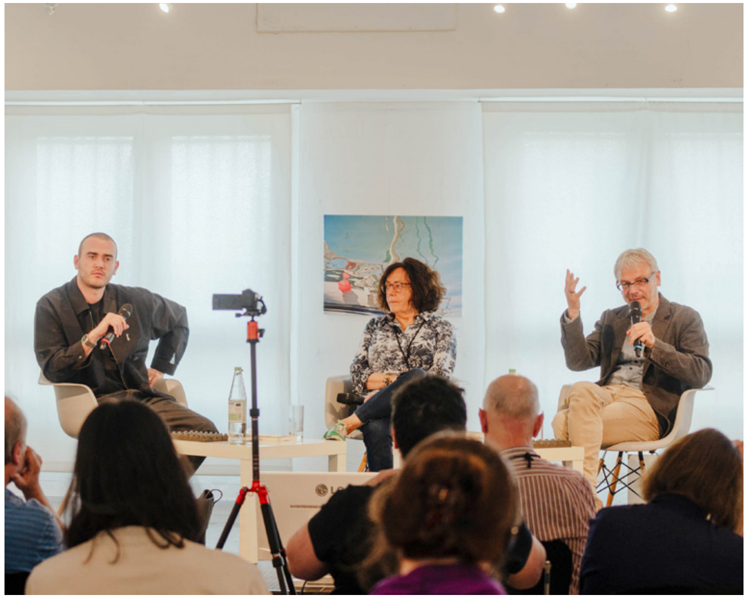
A live demonstration of just how charged the conversation around ideology and artistic autonomy has become

Ideology has long preoccupied Oberhausen, from its famous Manifesto of 1962 to last year’s controversy, where the then-director’s social media post after 7 October 2023 triggered a series of repercussions that led to a boycott campaign targeting the festival. The festival responded with a series of panel discussions surrounding the theme “Longing for Freedom from Contradiction”—though one might argue that the speaker line-up already constituted an open statement of the festival’s position.

> **The politicisation of institutions surrounding the contemporary cancel culture**

This year marks the festival's first edition under its new dual directorship. Several panels explicitly explored the independence of cultural institutions in an era defined by digital outrage, ideological conflict, and aesthetic resistance. The panel entitled "Ideology Machines," organised in collaboration with the European Short Film Network (ESFN) and centred around philosopher Harry Lehmann's 2024 book of the same title, is arguably the one that elicits the most animated discussion and heartfelt emotions. Moderated by Jonathan Guggenberger, Lehmann conversed with eminent film theorist Gertrud Koch.

Lehmann's central thesis consists of **the politicisation of institutions surrounding the contemporary cancel culture**. "Ideology machines is a neologism I coined because I observed that cancel culture exists, that this cancel culture occurs primarily in cultural institutions and universities, and I became interested in the mechanisms that led to its emergence. Ten years ago, it was virtually unknown, but now it is very well known and even has a major influence on elections," Lehmann started. His central argument was that cancel culture is "best understood as a process of the politicisation of institutions," which he termed "ideology machines," that is, "producers of ideology instead of art or science." Along these lines, he opined that political communication infiltrates and disrupts communications in art and science, which should be seen as having independent functions. Invoking the renowned theorist Michael Freeden's concept of ideology being



Jonathan Guggenberger, Gertrud Koch, Harry Lehmann © Victoria Jung "language games," Lehmann advocated a clear separation between "political communication" and the "artistic and scientific communication" within institutions, suggesting this would preserve their independence and functional autonomy.

Crisis of Institutions, Lack of Democracy

Gertrud Koch immediately challenged this conceptual separation, arguing that functionalist theories inadequately explain current institutional behaviours, as **moral terms and economic contexts deeply influence institutions**. Koch pointed out that cancel culture, far from being a recent phenomenon, has been prevalent for at least a decade. Now fuelled by new media, she argued, it is not something one can isolate and abstract from the broader social contexts in which it operates; the new media landscape is linked to private ownership structure. She emphasised the necessity of addressing the real-world economic frameworks, cultural norms, and conflicts of interest that underpin institutional decisions.

Lehmann acknowledged the difficulty he faces when writing about ideology without communicating it politically and continued: "Due to the new digital media, cancel culture is first reinforced to such an extent in political communication within institutions that it can disrupt institutions and threaten their functioning." He argued that group polarisation, which was often formally prevented, stopped, and blocked in the analogue media world, has become prevalent in the digital media age. "Digital media is creating a whole new situation where these group polarisation processes are triggered because the administrators become morally and politically blackmailable by the political activism of their own milieu. [...] As a result of this arbitration process that is initiated, the damage to their reputation is so great that general institutions are increasingly moving towards the political course where their own milieu is actually anchored." Lehmann proposed that institutions should strive for independence to prevent further politicisation of society, especially in an era when digitalisation and globalisation amplify divides not only between left and right, but also between the winners and losers of that very process.

Moral terms and economic contexts deeply influence institutions

In response, Koch asked, "Aren't institutions simply relatively small and powerless actors in these larger cases?" She continued, "That's exactly how I see it. In this sense, there is a loss of function for institutions. Institutions as institutions can no longer exercise their positions of power." In response to Lehmann's concluding chapter, which proposes to repair this by giving institutions back their old autonomy, Koch said, "Who is supposed to do that? We have political decisions that come from outside the institutions, so that would again be part of political communication. The change can only be done from the outside." **She advocated for public involvement in decision-making as part of a fundamentally democratic approach to institutional management**. In her view, this was especially important today, as the root of the problem lies in a broader crisis of democracy: "It's not just a loss of function of institutions, but a loss of function of institutions is a lack of democracy."

Ideology Interrupters and Political Interests

This is when the disagreement between the panellists became fully apparent. Lehmann identified it as a difference in the role they assigned to politics: "I'm much more optimistic that you can counteract this dysfunctionality of institutions in liberal democracies with something that isn't a direct political act in that sense and that you can do without rethinking the big picture." He cited the Chicago Principles that were developed at the University of Chicago, a point of reference for freedom of expression, as an example. "The decisive factor is that there are these various ideology interrupters. **Society must also learn to deal with digital communication differently**," he said, seeing art and science as inherently open terrain for debates.

"Society must also learn to deal with digital communication differently"

Harry Lehmann

Koch, however, challenged this perspective, questioning the genuine freedom of scientific research given economic structures in funding. She asked, "Who is behind these institutions? What interests are at play and on which side?" Essentially, politics is about protecting one's interests, which are often antagonistic to other interests, and institutions play a role in this. Funding for scientific research also depends on this concept of interest. She referred to the growth of women's studies as an example of research flourishing precisely due to explicit demands from people, which led to funding opportunities. In Koch's words, Lehmann's theorisation was all too harmonising and uncontextualised, as if there were an individual who had always ensured that everything runs smoothly on their initiative.

Discussing political art, Lehmann criticised art “based on ideology” for putting all opinions under scrutiny, precluding genuine discussion and hence becoming unsatisfactory. For him, art should avoid prescribing political positions, as doing so reduces art’s fundamental openness. Koch countered, arguing that it is art that wants to leave institutions for it wants to be political: **“Art is political when one talks about art.”** Lehmann cited *documenta 15* as an instance where the institution became so politicised that “it is now perceived by society as nothing more than a political event, and no longer as an art event.” In his opinion, “most of the works that could be seen actually lacked the conventional artistic factor and the function as the provider of aesthetic experience, leading to its alteration into part of political conflicts.” Koch disagreed, remarking that *documenta* is not exclusively perceived as political. She stressed that *documenta* has played a political role since its inception, highlighting the importance of context in interpreting both art and institutional mandates.

When the discussion opened to the audience, heated debates immediately ensued. The first reaction was a criticism that Lehmann’s “group polarisation” concept is overly simplistic and naïve, and the conceptualisation of cancel culture is far too vague and no more than “snow from yesterday”, bringing up Adrian Daub’s *Cancel Culture Transfer* as a much more interesting understanding of the origin, function, and essence of cancel culture. The audience member pointed out, “You don’t see the problem politically, and yet you respond politically.” Lehmann’s response to this was, “Well, I’ve written a book about it. It took a certain amount of effort.” Moderator Jonathan Guggenberger’s attempt to defuse rising emotions with a plea (“I would simply ask you to leave the immediate emotional reactions out of it”) was met by audience rebuke. The latter exasperatedly noted the inherent emotional nature of this discussion, recommending Lehmann to read Theodor W. Adorno, while adding, “Our brain is activated by art through emotional empathy and cognitive empathy. That’s what art does and always does.”

> **“Art is political when one talks about art.”**
>
> Gertrud Koch

Unequal Power Dynamics

Audience questions also challenged Lehmann’s omission of power asymmetries in his discussion of cancel culture. They underscored examples such as international students in the United States, who pay astronomical tuition fees and risk deportation for expressing dissent at the whim of the authority—a clear instance of unequal power dynamics. The act of "cancelling," they argued, is not on equal footing with the authority's power to arrest and deport someone—an action that could undo years of hard-earned effort and substantial financial investment. The question was also: Is there a distinction between political communication and political activism or political action in Lehmann's framework?

This film student's question ties back to the socio-economic context that Koch touched upon, which is notably absent from Lehmann's book. Responding to this, Lehmann emphasised that political communication inherently involves power dynamics, whereas Koch drew upon Talcott Parsons's theory of action, "Action is system," indicating that individual actions are part of larger systems and stressing the importance of distinguishing between different kinds of group formation.

Another audience participant referenced artists with inherently political artistic expressions, such as Harun Farocki and Hans Haacke, having hoped that the panel discussion would have focused on the mechanism of dialectical thinking in artistic positions, of the structural, analytical underpinnings of artworks. A final remark invoked the example of Canadian cultural institutions under Trump's presidency, noting how they informed artists how to vote, and celebrated a Liberal electoral victory while preparing requests for state funding—a scenario underscoring the intertwined relationship between political affiliation and institutional interests.

While Lehmann's propositions seem to inhabit a sanitised theoretical vacuum where "political communication" could neatly be separated from the realm of art and science, Koch provides a more nuanced and historically grounded viewpoint, recognising the profound economic forces that shape institutional decisions. Lehmann's responses to audience questions often reiterated phrasing from his book, ironically paralleling the "language game" that Michael Freeden refers to when discussing ideology, and which Lehmann himself repeatedly deploys. By detaching artistic and scientific communication from political communication's "language game," one inadvertently initiates another language game.

Indeed, one might question whether Lehmann's clean division between political and institutional realms is conceivable, let alone achievable, in the complex economic realities cultural institutions face today. Can cultural institutions maintain their artistic functions without governmental funding? **Would it be possible to remain entirely independent while receiving public funding?** Would obligations towards private funders also make cultural institutions less independent than they aspire to be? What about audience expectations—wouldn't that also potentially lead to a kind of "dependence"? All in all, what does "independence" truly mean within cultural institutions? Aren't there also nuances according to political contexts and economic structures, as dependence on state funding might be more prominent in the European context, for example, involving specific negotiations and compromises, and carrying political implications? Meanwhile, would cultural institutions relying on private sponsorship—as exemplified by certain film festivals in China—confront analogous constraints shaped by commercial agendas?

Would it be possible to remain entirely independent while receiving public funding?

All these questions surrounding the elusive concepts of ideological autonomy and institutional neutrality that came to my mind—regrettably, neither effectively addressed by the author nor satisfactorily discussed during the panel—continued to resonate among the audience long after the event had ended. Moreover, it is noteworthy that the moderator's insistence on maintaining an emotionally neutral dialogue ("It's a panel!"), which did not truly quell the audience's emotional response, ironically emphasised yet another impossibility of clean-cut division, this time by excluding emotional engagement from human discourse about ideologies and institutions.

Where Does Independence Start?

What was revealed during the panel was a conspicuous dissonance between panellists, organisers, and audience expectations. As it happens, the frustration evident among the audience underscores the impracticality of Lehmann's proposed depoliticisation and highlights the inevitability of political positioning within any structured dialogue. Just as the presence of a camera inherently introduces a perspective, be it fiction or documentary, a panel composition inherently signals a stance, whether

subtly, unintentionally, or deliberately. As individuals, we all come from our unique backgrounds and experiences, carrying these into contemporary public discourse. We also arrive with anticipation for what we hope to engage with in a panel—especially one that carries "ideology" in its title, and particularly at a film festival like Oberhausen. **Our exchanges of opinion involve challenging our preconceived ideas**—potentially influenced by social media and algorithms, surely—renegotiating them, and choosing whether or not to readjust them. Mutual feelings of frustration thus arose because both panellists and the public entered the room with pre-existing ideas intrinsic to their identities, which were subsequently disrupted and unmet.
Similarly, would the composition of panellists, to a certain extent, predetermine the direction of the panel? **Would the film selection of a festival predetermine audience responses?** Furthermore, would the selection of films and the invitation of filmmakers contribute to the composition of the audience itself? If an idealised vacuum world did exist, where would "independence" and "autonomy" start, and how could they be guaranteed? These questions, which prominently haunted Oberhausen's 2024 edition along with a panel named "Longing for Freedom of Contradiction", are crucial and persist even with changes in leadership.

Significantly, Lehmann named only one institution—*documenta 15*—a relatively safe target unlikely to be directly represented in the audience. Judging by the audience's response, this was a hot potato that Lehmann probably would have preferred to avoid in hindsight, as it implicitly raised debates about what should be considered art and whether political concerns naturally fall within the responsibility of art institutions. This sidebar discussion connects back to the audience's references to Adorno, provoking reflection upon what constitutes art and whether art is inherently political—questions with profound historical roots.
Filmmakers' and film professionals' reactions to Lehmann's remarks in Oberhausen notably revealed their stance on these issues.

Our exchanges of opinion involve challenging our preconceived ideas

Flanked by a panel two days earlier titled "Who Goes Fascist?"—in which social and cognitive neurologists, psychologists, and artists discussed whether there are psychological and neurological predispositions that drive people toward the extreme right—and another panel titled "Aesthetics of Resistance," this one centred around the ideology machine, did feel somewhat odd. It was probably more akin to a book launch event: intended to promote a book, yet seemingly misplaced and unlikely to have significantly boosted sales among this audience. It also fell short of becoming a genuinely responsive dialogue. While somewhat guarded, **the discussion remarkably succeeded in provoking candid emotions and heated debates**, thus illuminating the deep polarisation between advocates of institutional depoliticisation and those demanding explicit acknowledgment and inclusion of political identities, solidarity, and voices.

The panel's most precious value, in my opinion, was precisely its manifestation of the presence of pluralism in our world, where cancel culture was interpreted differently, the existential ideas about art were brought to the foreground, and the concept of the ideology machine was openly debated and nuanced. For this to happen consistently, institutions like the International Short Film Festival Oberhausen face a continual imperative to foster diversity across all aspects—from programming to invited speakers—genuinely embracing ideological heterogeneity in a manner that philosopher Gilles Deleuze would have envisioned as smooth spaces for contradicting, conflicting, and continuously generated thoughts, ideas, and concepts.

Outdated “Discussions” on New Media

Reflections on the Panel Discussion “Connecting Short Films with a New Generation”
IndieLisboa, 8 May 2025

by Rafael Fonseca

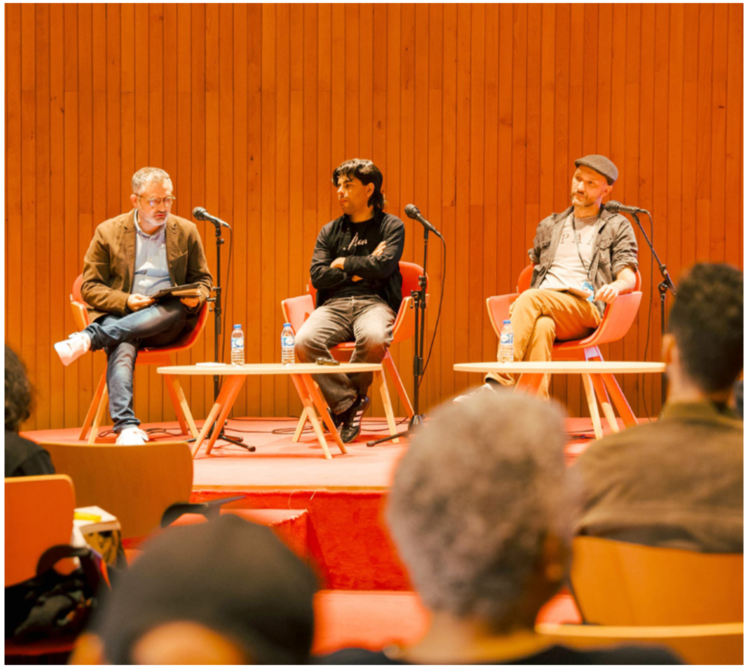
The title of IndieLisboa’s European Short Film Network-hosted **panel discussion**, “The Audience of the Future: Connecting Short Films with a New Generation”, held a certain prophetic yet abstract promise—reinforced by a glitchy, black-and-white landscape of shapes as catalogue illustration, a frame out of Rosa Menkman’s algorithmic 2017 film **DCT:SYPHONING: The 1000000th (64th) Interval**. What followed after I set up my recording devices and took a seat felt unfortunately less sibylline. To start, the decision not to hold the event in Portuguese was perhaps misplaced—while all three panelists had a conversational level of English, I felt unsure to what degree language proficiency would determine the discussion’s remit, academically and contextually. However apparent, this linguistic limitation should only partially justify the lack of intellectual rigour evident throughout the talk. At its 22nd edition, IndieLisboa appointed three Portuguese film professionals to this panel: one screenwriter and two directors/editors. Their names—João Lacerda Matos, Márcio Laranjeira, and Bruno Abib—could not be found anywhere in the festival materials, an omission which suggests some last-minute organisational decisions. According to the official programme notes, this is what the hour was set out to cover:

In an era when storytelling formats are evolving rapidly, how can short films stay relevant and resonate with emerging audiences? This panel explores ***the intersection between short films, television series, and the digital platforms that shape contemporary viewing habits****. Are traditional festival models outdated in the face of games, AI, VR, par-*

ticipatory interactivity, web series, and social media platforms like TikTok?

The first words opening the panel discussion addressed this prompt at its most superficial level, asking, indeed, how short films could remain relevant and resonate with emerging audiences, proposing, with candor, a peril in the face of AI, VR, web media, and social media. This is a rhetorical, even irrelevant question. It exists so it can be dismantled in all sorts of effortless counter-examples that emerge. As if there is some kind of danger to the hegemony of film, of moving image, especially in **the short form, the most resistant and versatile of all**; as if we haven't this year, like in previous ones, watched shorts **made with/about AI**, with VR-like elements, in three dimensions or **two**, made out of **security footage** or with **chat messages**. As for the festival models that platform short films, we can hardly say they are outdated either, as long as they continue to accommodate the rich, plural natures of the works.

Short films are always relevant: it's difficult to entertain the notion that the form is in perilous ground, or that things for cinema are going astray. **I don't mind the pessimism: it's a way to keep things sharp**, to show precisely how the short film format stays ahead of the curve and reflects con-



IndieLisboa Talk
hosted by ESFN
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temporaneity with precision. But the notion that shorts are in some kind of limbo state or arrested development is one the panelists should have immediately engaged with critically, or found resistance to, which didn't really happen.

This form of faux discussion reminded me of the times I used to do videography in corporate environments. As I overheard the contents of those presentations, which you see a lot of here in Lisbon—the home of the Websummit annual technology conference, for instance—I was always humoured by the repeated themes of “transition to the new media” or the “challenges of the digital”. I always wondered what one meant by “transition”. Twenty-five years have passed since the introduction of HTML4 and Flash. What “challenges of the digital” did these kinds of presentations keep referring to, as if that was still some looming thing?

Still tackling the question of relevance, Matos shared some statistics on streaming in Portugal, including metrics from RTP Play, the Portuguese public channel’s free streaming service for films and series, and the Spanish-Portuguese Filmin, which focuses on (worldwide) classics and independent cinema, including short films. Where could an interested party watch Portuguese short films, for instance? **This question about the lifespan of short films is essential and worth exploring**, but perhaps the voice of a distribution expert or a curator would have been more relevant to chime in. During the talk, there were no further elucidations besides the obvious: that films have limited festival runs, and a majority of the works then disappear from the public eye. The panelists go over this without diving into the subject, failing to either challenge the current festival models or to dispel the questions about their structural validity.

The rest of the talk seemed to cover topics as one does over coffee. There was hand-wringing about the attention span of kids and teens, their receptiveness to “slower films” and “the future”—armchair conversation which assumes a lot on behalf of young audiences, driving a wedge between “us” and “them” and establishing an ageist hierarchy based on insufficient notions of spectatorial normativity. There were wide-eyed musings on students shooting vertically with their phones, which is not uninteresting at all, but the paradigms of format and resolution were not put under further scrutiny, which would have been a good point of convergence among three working filmmakers. **Shooting video vertically should not be a strange, brave new world, but simply a way of seeing**: it can be just as radical as it can be boring, in the hands of a veteran as in those of a child.

Shooting video vertically should not be a strange, brave new world, but simply a way of seeing

When the subject of video games is breached, for instance, the panelists bring up *Grand Theft Auto 6*—joking that “a lot of people will stop living their social lives” to play it, an interesting statement I would have loved to hear followed up on—and the 2013 video game that inspired a media franchise, *The Last of Us*, praising how it is "like a film, but interactive". This particularly egregious take shows a fundamentally wrong understanding of video games as an independent, distinct medium from film. It's now been fifteen years since Roger Ebert famously said that "video games could never be art", prompting discussion and responses with outlasting impact, shedding light indeed on a new wave of 'art games' as much as on the medium's timeless works. Back then, I myself was playing titles like ***The Graveyard***, a "walking simulator" where you control an old lady with the goal of sitting on a cemetery bench for a while and heading back (there was always the chance of her passing away in peace while perched there). The *Graveyard* **influenced** Richard Lemarchand, who was at the time the lead game designer at Naughty Dog, the company that would go on to develop *The Last of Us*. Lemarchand claims that games "hold our attention by taking advantage of the way we are grabbed by seeing systems evolve in front of our eyes". This striking quote illustrates a basic separation between the two media: why video games will only ever be "*like* films" on the caricature level, and why films will only ever be "*like* video games" in the same way.

I do, as a note, find it concerning how normalised it is to cut our contemporaries a lot of slack when it comes to engaging with the ever-evolving aspects of filmmaking technology, or to give ourselves a pass for discussing them on a theoretically shallow level, but, at its worst, this is a contextual problem. **The speed with which media trends and morphological aspects accelerate is debilitating**: new phenomena should not feel like arcane knowledge, but they do. In the text that accompanies Rosa Menkman's short ***Where are the newer media?*** she writes: "I am not even sure what 'new' means! (...) which intervals should I choose, and on what axis should I analyse and perceive the developments of this 'new(er)' (technology, aesthetics, politics)?". There is such a lag between real communicational and technological advancement and our perception of it that, as it stood, one of the examples given here of interactive media was the choose-your-own-adventure *Black Mirror* episode [*Bandersnatch*], the same one we've heard cited since 2018. If this is the most novel case in mainstream awareness, we could be flying blind indeed.

The speed with which media trends and morphological aspects accelerate is debilitating

If we are to draw a connection between short films and the rapidly evolving media and communication landscape, it becomes apparent that **short films can serve as a 'watching over' of technological change**. Shorts that straddle the line between documentary and essay greatly exemplify this, one such example in IndieLisboa's programme being Dennis Harvey's ***The Building and Burning of a Refugee Camp***, which accompanies the formation of a camp of refugees near the International Protection Office in Dublin and its destruction at the hands of far-right protesters. An essential part of the short's runtime, and indispensable to its multiple perspectives, are excerpts from Twitter livestreams. Since the intent here is to document the camp's brief history, there is no hesitation to include the full breadth of available media.

Short films can serve as a 'watching over' of technological change

Similarly, Nicolas Gouralt's ***Their Eyes***, a prominent film on the 2024-25 festival circuit, depicts the testimonies of several individuals who are part of the outsourced, exploited working (remotely) for self-driving car software companies. Tasked with annotating video frames taken by these cars—with the terms pedestrian, vehicle, vegetation, sky, etc.—for the betterment of the software's recognition of things, most of the short's runtime is composed by depictions of their work environment, be it screen recordings of chatlogs in Slack or the hypnotic, fascinating colourful frames of roads, with items tagged or yet to be tagged. In the film's second half, we see the workers film their own neighbourhoods, impoverished beyond comparison to the garish frames of California motorways, yet ironically representing a much greater challenge if they ever had to "annotate it", they say, as the doors and fences are thinner, the amount of objects and people higher.

To fully portray the existence of a refugee camp that lasts only a matter of days, to project the voice and image of the invisible, unknown workforce behind software—what other object could fulfill this function of an on-guard, dialectical, open document than the short film? I wish we could have seen and discussed these (or other) films at the panel: it could have easily led to a sharing of perspectives. The floor only opened for questions at the end, and the only one was, dryly, about a networking database for industry professionals. It's unfortunate, in retrospect, that the conversation was not a collective one: I feel that most of us in the room could have taken part in it.

Claiming Before Measuring: Impact Funding as a New Reality

Reflections on the Panel Discussion "How to Measure Our Impact"
Vienna Shorts, 30 May 2025

by Laura Walde

What is most certainly not a new reality: short film festivals constitute a sector of an industry in which money can never be the primary reason why you show up to work as an employee or a freelancer. Rather, you will probably cite an intrinsic motivation based on a somewhat indefinable love for the short film format and a high degree of idealism as the driving forces for all the hard work you put into selecting *just the right films* and organising festivals, small and large. When Vienna Shorts hosted its industry panel titled *How to Measure Our Impact* in May 2025, the screening room was full of people who care deeply about short films, the festivals where they can be seen, and about showcasing their value to the world. While our colleagues and even our audience who flock to the cinemas year after year might already be convinced of the benefits this little format brings to society, the institutions funding our endeavours might need another level of persuasion. Increasingly, this persuading must come in forms that go **beyond a collection of spreadsheets comparing this year's admission numbers to last year's edition.**

Beyond a collection of spreadsheets comparing this year's admission numbers to last year's edition

In his presentation at the 22nd edition of Vienna Shorts, Stefan Schöggl, a PhD candidate at the Center for Nonprofit Organisations and Social Impact at the Economic University of Vienna, offered a glimpse into the complex world of impact value chains and impact analysis. For decades, festivals have communicated success through performance metrics such as visitor numbers, ticket sales, and social media followers. These are (relatively) easy to count and easy to compare. But as mentioned, funders and policymakers increasingly want to go beyond the numbers game. The move from measuring outputs (such as the number of films screened or visitors attending) to focusing on outcomes (what transformations these films spark, what shifts occur in visitors) might very well signal **a deeper discomfort with the relentless pursuit of growth in all areas of life**, also in the cultural sector. In a time marked by climate crisis and growing calls for sufficiency, chasing endless expansion rings increasingly insubstantial. Hence, the grantmakers' new focus is on asking for proof of social and cultural value in exchange for their money.

Impact as Roadmap

The challenge, however, begins long before measuring the impact of the outcomes our outputs (might) initiate. My claim here is that we first need to discuss and define what we mean when we say "impact." Schöggl rightly explained that to speak of "impact" has become a buzzword in cultural policy and funding circles, but his presentation offered little explanation of the slippery term's definition. This is a gap we, as a sector, must close in collaboration with each other. **We all use the term "impact," yet we rarely mean precisely the same thing**. For some, impact already begins at the level of access—i.e., giving audiences the chance to see films they couldn't otherwise get a hold of, or enjoying the cinematic pleasures a festival has to offer. But should we really already speak of an "impact" if an outcome has its affect and effect on a level that essentially only caters to a logic of supply and demand in terms of what a festival offers anyway? Or is the term impact only significant once it refers to a meaningful change that occurs because of our initiatives—changes in attitudes, knowledge, behaviours, opportunities, or social conditions? And what, then, would such a change specifically entail?

This is a call for precision in how we define and understand the notion of impact. In my view, the main benefit of thinking about and working toward impact is that it compels us to think more deeply about purpose, mission, and values. An impact model forces festivals to really articulate why they do what they do and how this has an effect on larger societal questions that touch upon challenges that go beyond our little festival bubbles. Also, by mapping outputs to outcomes, festivals can more easily prioritise the allocation of resources toward activities that truly advance their mission. Impact analysis is not only a tool for reporting success, then; it is, first and foremost, **a framework for learning and improving, for ensuring that cultural initiatives contribute meaningfully to society**. Understanding what changes because of our work helps us demonstrate relevance, justify funding, and refine our strategies. Professional standards for impact analysis provide us with a roadmap, a shared language and methodology for defining impact, thereby ensuring credibility and comparability across organisations. As a short film festival community, we should commit to these standards: understand them, agree on them, apply them, and align our strategies accordingly.

Impact Measurement or: Be Careful What You Wish For

The panel discussion at Vienna Shorts went one step further. In his short presentation, Schöggl took the audience through a rather complex version of the Impact Value Chain that, given his professional background, focused on the actual qualitative and quantitative tools for impact measurement. This, of course, also begins with defining the underlying logic of change: what problem is being addressed, who is affected, and what long-term goals are envisioned. This forms the basis for a theory of change, mapping the pathway from resources (input) and activities (output) to the outcomes and impacts that matter. The process continues by identifying separate stakeholders—such as visitors, filmmakers, industry partners, and the local community—and hypothesising the changes that might occur for each group. These anticipated outcomes are then translated into indicators that can be observed and measured.

A framework for learning and improving, for ensuring that cultural initiatives contribute meaningfully to society

Upon my question whether the basic IOOI model (Input – Output – Outcome – Impact) wouldn't suffice to introduce impact logic into the daily work of small to mid-sized festival organisations and cover their basic needs in identifying and mapping the desired impact and communicating with foundations and the public sector, Schöggl countered that with regard to hard facts and proper measuring of impact: the model is too simplistic. That might certainly be the case from the perspective of an academic and economic approach to impact measurement. But given the reality of short film festivals, their limited financial and staff resources, and their niche existence in the larger cultural sector, is it really wise to focus on the gold standard? Or should we focus on framing our work in impact language without drowning in data that might not even help to make our case?

Here's the paradox: while funders demand evidence for impact, the very proof that the impact logic we work towards might not work in our favour. I call for caution at this point: if we speak of the type of social and cultural impact that goes beyond the mere provision of access, which is every festival's core business, we might need to be very realistic about the fact that there is only so much impact we have. **What if the results are negligible? What if the data undermines the self-assuredness that keeps our motivation, idealism, and projects alive?** What if measuring impact only proves what we're preaching to our own choir and thus raises the question whether self-affirmation can really be counted as impact? While the impact might very well be real in a 1:1 setting, the numbers to support it might not look like much on paper. Also, with limited resources, can short film festivals really afford the type of complex qualitative and quantitative evaluations required to measure impact?

Impact Thinking as Strategy

All questions and caveats aside, the panel on impact measurement at Vienna Shorts and Schöggl's introduction to impact logic were important introductions to the complex yet intriguing world of impact analysis and its vocabulary. One that the short film festival sector must become fluent in promptly. Because it can be a tool for reflection, planning, and communication. Start with your vision. Articulate your contribution. Then explain how you do it and why you believe it matters. This narrative approach acknowledges assumptions and addresses hurdles—without pretending to deliver irrefutable evidence. Understanding and following an impact model helps distinguish between outputs and outcomes, prioritise how to deploy scarce resources, and sharpen arguments. **It's less about data as a weapon and more about clarity of purpose**. Impact measurement is not a silver bullet. It won't resolve the existential questions facing festivals amid shrinking budgets and rising expectations. But it can shift the conversation from

What if the results are negligible? What if the data undermines the self-assuredness that keeps our motivation, idealism, and projects alive?

quantity to quality, from content to relevance. This might just be semantics, but semantics matter. In the end, measuring impact is as much about cultural self-reflection as about accountability. It asks us to define what matters—and to act accordingly.

Presentation by
Stefan Schöggl
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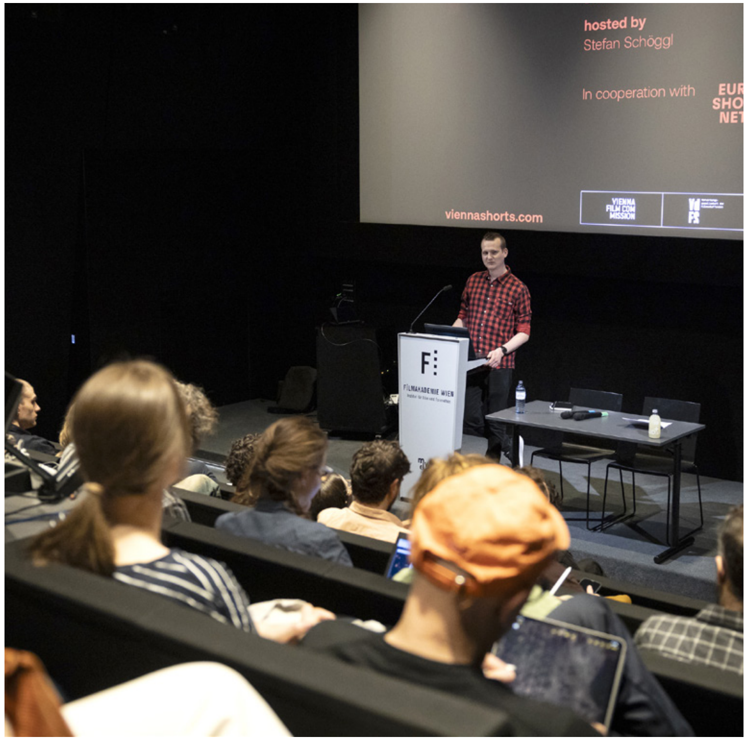

Impact Measurement: The Basics

by Stefan Schöggl

Impact measurement begins with defining the underlying logic of change: what problem is being addressed, who is affected, and what long-term goals are envisioned. This forms the basis for a theory of change, mapping the pathway from resources and activities to the outcomes and impacts that matter. The process continues by identifying separate stakeholders—such as visitors, filmmakers, industry partners, and the local community—and hypothesising the changes that might occur for each group. These anticipated outcomes are then translated into indicators that can be observed and measured. Data collection combines qualitative and quantitative approaches. Interviews, observations, and content analysis help to understand experiences and perceptions, while surveys and longitudinal studies provide measurable evidence of change. Both primary data and secondary sources can be used to verify whether the hypothesised impacts occur and to what extent. A critical element is accounting for "deadweight," the portion of outcomes that would have happened without a specific intervention, ensuring that reported impact reflects genuine added value. Finally, the findings are analysed and presented to inform strategic decisions, strengthen accountability, and communicate cultural and social relevance.

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The Limited Number of Cinema Spaces Poses a Major Problem

Reflections on the Panel Discussion "Cinemagoers Without Cinemas"
25 FPS Festival, 27 September 2025

by Marko Stojiljković

At the 21st International Experimental Film and Video Festival 25 FPS in Zagreb, the European Short Film Network hosted a panel titled *Cinemagoers without Cinemas*, with a focus on the disappearance of movie theatres across urban (and less urban) landscapes. The panel was conducted in Croatian and extended the series' critical framework on the future of festivals as both screening platforms and centres for fostering community, addressing the situation of independent cinemas in Croatia's capital.

Cinema has survived the "attacks" of new technologies such as television, video, piracy, and streaming, but in Croatia, it's often seen as a niche entertainment offer for an already divided audience. Families with children and franchise consumers visit shopping mall multiplexes to get their weekly (monthly? yearly?) dose of leisure, topped up with snacks and (soft) drinks for the extra buck. More "artsy" audiences go to smaller cinemas, which, while scattered, can come together to form networks such as the Croatian Network of Independent Cinemas, called *Kino mreža*. It helps them pool together subsidies to realise film programmes, as none of them can make it on their own. However, those shared or "touring" programmes are often either geared towards families with children or way too niche in their specifics, while the rest of each cinema's repertoire is reserved for either mainstream or "mainstream art house" titles dictated by the chosen sales representatives, international distributors, and A-list festivals.

In that conundrum, there is less and less space for cinema that is not classic narrative fiction—meaning short films, experimental films, animation (family-friendly or adult), and documentaries. These "categories" find their way into the repertoire only by exception or as part of a larger framework, such as film festivals of local or national significance. From that point of view, it is even more obvious that **we are not living through a series of crises, but that crisis is more or less perpetual**, presenting new challenges to an out-of-balance "ecosystem". When it comes to answers, the commonly proposed solutions are rather simplistic: on one end of the spectrum, there is the prompt for a "radical democratisation" where cinemas should open to any kind of audiovisual content; on the other end, a more cynical perspective embraces the "elite" status of cinema and filmgoing in order to ask for more subsidies. In between, there is a seemingly more humane, "market realistic" mindset, which postulates that cinemas should double down on efforts to regain a competitive status amongst other forms of art and entertainment. None of the above, however, can magically solve the mystery.

On the Brink of Collapse

With all this contextual knowledge at hand, we can now zoom in on the particular Zagreb examples discussed at the 25 FPS panel, where things look even more complex and dire. Firstly, there is an inherited distrust of the Croatian audience towards domestic cinema, "earned" during and after the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s, when national cinema functioned as a state-operated propaganda tool, producing low-quality patriotic kitsch. Films of certain types are sometimes able to break that psychological barrier—usually those for children and young audiences—and comedies (including the low-brow populist ones) also speak to the Zeitgeist and fare better in some parts of the country than others. Occasionally, there are "black swan" phenomena, such as this year's Croatian Academy Award submission, the playful docu-fiction *Fiume o morte!* directed by Igor Bezinović—the most-seen Croatian feature documentary since the country's independence in 1991.

Unable to compete with multiplexes as the audience was shrinking and unable to meet the technical demands of maintenance

Another "legacy" problem led to the closing down of old single-screen cinemas. **Unable to compete with multiplexes as the audience was shrinking and unable to meet the technical demands of maintenance**, many independent cinema spaces were forced to cease operations. This shutdown culminated in the period between 2019–2023, first with the closing of Kino Europa, which used to serve as the centre for *Kino mreža*. It came as a slashing decision by the then city government (notoriously corrupt), and to make matters worse, both Kino Europa and Tuskanac were heavily affected by an earthquake in the spring of 2020 and are still in the process of reconstruction.

The limited number of cinema spaces already poses a major problem, given that Zagreb hosts a dozen film gatherings throughout the year. It is also the case that the current (working) cinema in central Zagreb, called Kinoteka, is owned by the Catholic Church; it must also showcase both regular and repertoire screenings simultaneously. Moreover, there are different issues with the rest of the screening spaces: Surogat kino KIC is far too small and makeshift, and the Gorgona hall of the Museum of Contemporary Art may be bigger, but is still not big enough and is slightly offhand. There is also the big hall in the Student Centre, which is in poor condition and under neglectful management, and the Forum Cinema, which lacks programming continuity. The festivals then have to strike deals (long-standing or year-long) with multi-purpose halls without any equipment of their own, as the last available spaces. The same goes for deals with some of the centrally located multiplexes: ZagrebDox uses Kaptol Boutique Cinema, operated by the CineStar chain, while Zagreb Film Festival opts for CineStar in Branimir Mall. **But the whole cinema-going ecosystem is on the brink of collapse.**

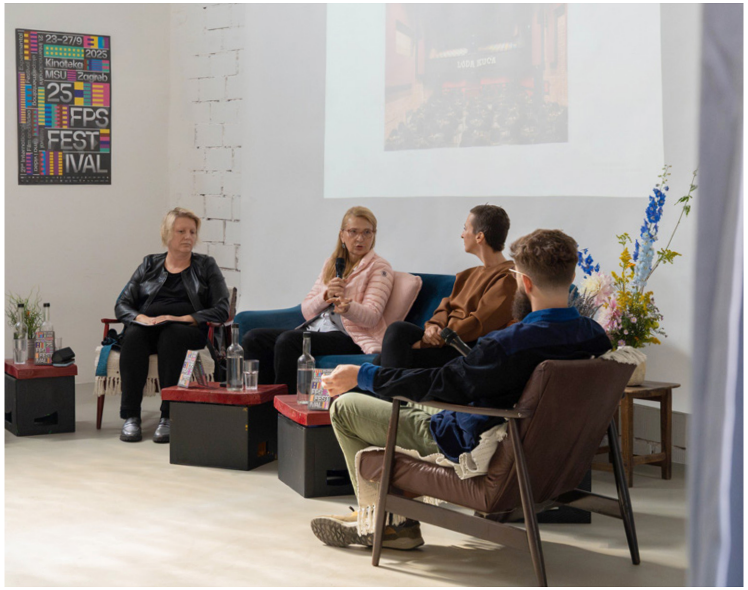
No more Kino (in) Europa?

All of this was discussed on September 27 at Klet Gallery in Zagreb, within the framework of the 25 FPS Festival, with Drazen Puklavec—a journalist and public relations expert—as moderator. The speakers were *Eclectica* producer Tina Tisljar, Deputy Chief Executive Officer of the Croatian Audiovisual Centre Maja Vukic, secretary of the Croatian Film Association Tatjana Aćimović, and Hulahop and Animafest Zagreb producer Matea Milić. The panel itself did not solve the situation—as it would be far too optimistic to expect such easily found solutions—but the speakers nevertheless offered their insights on the topic, sharing some of their experiences in tackling those venue-specific challenges.

“Six years of promises” was a refrain shared by all the speakers, referring to the lack of hard deadlines for when the two major Zagreb cinemas would be up and running again. Kino Europa has been unusable since 2019, and Tuškanac has been closed since October 2023 due to extensive renovation works. As both institutions are of immense cultural significance and public funds finance their renovations, it's no surprise that the whole process has been under scrutiny, leading to transparent yet convoluted and time-consuming administrative procedures. For the time being, the film programme at Tuškanac is touring venues such as KIC, Forum, Scena Ribnjak, and Histrion, a venue originally built as a cinema but used as a stage theatre since 2007.

An additional problem is the fact that humans are creatures of habit, and **once the habit of cinemagoing is lost, it can hardly be established again**, especially without a strong campaign. The initiative of offering free student tickets, for instance, brought up by the panelists, has failed to drastically boost audience numbers, especially when the venue for a particular film programme changes with each screening. However, the consensus was that more meaningful co-operations between cinemas, cultural workers, and institutions on education programmes are what keep the audience flowing. It also helps that Zagreb has a dedicated film club, Kinoklub Zagreb, which—although it does not operate as a regular cinema—provides a stable platform for members, workshop participants, and other small-scale screenings.

In that regard, Tišljar expressed the view that the branding of Croatian cinema is, in general, poor and reminded the audience that "it took two years to establish some sort of brand continuity in the case of Kino Europa" after its refurbishment in the 2000s. She also pointed out that the film community and the community of culture workers in Croatia are



„Six years of promises" and countless questions © Lucija Koren

small in general, and "even if they were to consolidate their efforts in an ideal world, they would still lack the power to put pressure on the government." On the other hand, Vukić chimed in that continuity in financing certain projects is at least stable and that different government institutions at different levels are genuinely willing to help. However, their funding competitions still overlap, while the city and the national government are in opposition.

Diversity and autonomy can also pose problems, the panel discussed, when it comes to the Independent Cinemas Network. As the Network is not a single body with a single "head" or board, but comprises "100 cinemas with 100 managers" across the country, some of them are bound to be less competent than others.
As a result, the situation outside Zagreb does not look peachy either. Milić painted the picture with the example of the distribution of Bruno Anković's *Celebration* (2024) in the town of Gospić, where it was actually filmed: the film did not manage to get more than two screenings, despite the fact that they were sold out. In the cited example, the manager seemed to have "known their audience", or maybe simply wanted to rent the hall for other commercial purposes.

There are no simple solutions, no ways to coordinate and hasten the efforts

While it would be easy to conclude that "everybody is trying to do their job the best they can," **there are no simple solutions, no ways to coordinate and hasten the efforts**, nor a centralised framework at present. The specifics of Croatian society—where most people still see culture as a playground for different elites, so they choose other, more openly political causes to support and put pressure on government institutions—also play a role in the equation. Guerilla action of sorts is also out of the question, since recent experiences with "occupied", "liberated", or "self-governed" cinemas have backfired. In the wider region, Kriterion in Sarajevo no longer operates, while Belgrade's Zvezda cinema maintains a minimal programme, visible only to those who closely follow its social media. Across Western Europe, independent cinemas that once served as cultural hubs have been closing their doors after successful runs—from La Clef in Paris to venues in Lisbon, Brussels, and many other cities.

According to a recent survey, **20% of European arthouse cinemas are at serious risk of closure**, highlighting that Zagreb's situation is also part of a broader phenomenon. The Croatian mentality dic-

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tates, however, that the “decent effort” against such developments often stops at lamenting on social media or chatting with like-minded friends over coffee. Organizing physical gatherings around a cultural cause would be almost revolutionary. Truth be told, protests against the closure of Kino Europa in 2019 were largely led by prominent culture and media workers. It merits saying that the spark of rebellion was preventively defused for the majority of people by a smear campaign led by the then-mayor of Zagreb against the cinema management. Traces of it still appear in various media, including the most-visited portal, Index. It seems there is no other choice but to wait and adapt as best one can. The future of cinemas, it seems, still depends mostly on individuals and their input. But the core question remains the same: “For how long?”

The Machine in the Ghost: AI as a Lifeboat with Limited Spaces in a Vast Sea of Possibilities

Reflections on the Panel Discussion "Animation and AI"
Uppsala Kortfilmfestival, 24 October 2025

by Dana Linssen

The disruptive powers of Artificial Intelligence tools on the creative processes of animation filmmakers and artists were the starting point for an all-encompassing discussion at the 44th Uppsala Short Film Festival. We are at a moment when one cannot simply separate technology from ethics and aesthetics.

It's hard to imagine that it was just two years ago that the 2023 Hollywood actors' and screenwriters' strikes to establish agreements on the (fair) use of Artificial Intelligence, among other things, paralysed American film production; while it was only early 2025, that the usage of AI technologies in Oscar-nominated films such as *The Brutalist* and *Emilia Pérez* was regarded with laconic nonchalance. And as if the protests never happened, 2025 ended with the news that, as the first major studio, Disney struck a deal with OpenAI, licensing parts of its catalogue to consumers to be able to generate new images with over two hundred (animation) characters from Disney's franchises, such as Pixar, Marvel, and Star Wars. The future is arriving faster at Hollywood's doorstep than anyone could have predicted, citing fan culture as an excuse to produce more training data for OpenAI's machine learning programmes.

2025 however, was also the year that artistic AI pioneer and filmmaker Hito Steyerl published the book

Medium Hot: The Age of Slop (referring to the "spam" of the AI age: AI-generated digital content that is spreading over social media mostly because it generates revenues for platform owners), in which she analyses the use of AI in her own creative practice and research. And, a few months later, tech writer Cory Doctorow called the degradation and inundation of tech platforms by AI content "enshittification" in his eponymous book. This relates to the fact that **a significant portion of internet activity is no longer human**; people are now outnumbered by algorithmically driven bots. Still, venture capitalists are pumping record sums into the development of AI startups, while others are waiting for the bubble to burst. European politicians are concerned about the influence American companies are gaining on their national data and security. The conversations about AI are complex, multi-layered, and inextricably linked. **There is no such thing as art without politics in AI**.

Meanwhile, film professionals outside the mainstream's direct view engage in endless debates about the possibilities, effects, and sometimes the attraction of introducing AI into their various fields of work. Many of these exchanges are not so much driven by curiosity but by pragmatism and fear of not being able to resist. There's a remarkable mode of resignation: AI is here to stay, so how can we use it to our benefit, and what should we do to avoid missing the boat? The question seldom asked is if it is really desirable to yet again introduce new media apparatuses in the public domain, whereas simultaneously more and more public debates circle around the precipitate introduction of smartphones, and as has now become apparent, their disastrous effects on the mental health of young people and adults alike. Still, those who argue that AI is a lifeboat with few spaces are dismissed as doomsayers and technophobes.

One cannot simply separate technology from its ethical and aesthetic implications

What becomes clear from scrutinising such conversations is that **one cannot simply separate technology from its ethical and aesthetic implications**. And these problems do extend to environmental issues and the use of AI in politics, surveillance, and warfare. Caspar Sonnen, programmer of the DocLab programme at the International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA), **recently wondered** whether the filmmakers and artists who show their works during the IDFA programme for innovative, interactive, and immersive forms of documentary storytelling aren't unintentionally (and unpaid) constituting the research and development department of the tech industry.

On the other hand, independent artists and thinkers are probably the only ones you should want to trust with AI, because their research is not primarily driven by profit maximisation and other late-capitalist principles that, even without AI and its inherent biases, want to banish the human and the deviant from our societies because it hinders efficiency.

The Ghost

That the AI disruption is not solely technological in nature was again evident in a conversation on *Animation and AI* organised by the Uppsala Short Film Festival and the European Short Film Network, in which filmmaker/artists Steph Maj Swanson (a.k.a. Supercomposite) and Ulu Braun, moderated by cultural studies scholar Hannah Ohlén, spoke with Katja de Vries, associate professor at the Department of Law of Uppsala University. Swanson is probably best known as the creator of the Loab cryptid, a horror entity created—or "summoned"—by experimenting with a series of negatively weighted prompts in text-to-image generating AI software. Braun made a name for himself with video paintings, which led him to use AI in the short film *Gerhard* (2025), a mini-biopic about painter Gerhard Richter, whose photorealistic paintings challenged the boundaries between naturalism, authenticity, and theatrical artificiality. Because De Vries's research focuses on the challenges that AI-generated content poses to data protection, intellectual property, and other fields of law, ethical questions about authorship were also raised, as well as the as-yet-unresolved environmental costs associated with the electricity and water use of data centers, often in places where this is detrimental to human quality of life.

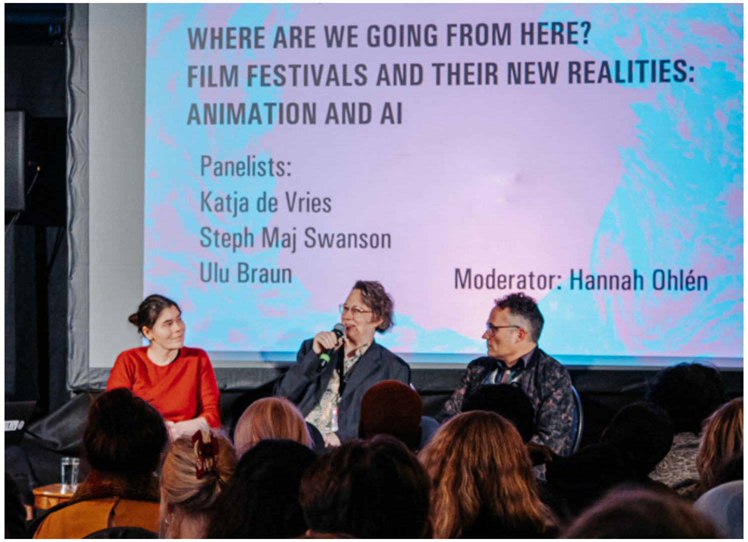
Since both Swanson and Braun work with AI techniques, the panel took place under the umbrella of animation. However, questions about whether AI is an animation technique, whether festivals should programme separate animation sections in the future, and whether there should be a quality mark for AI to increase transparency regarding its use were only very implicitly addressed. They may also be too technical to appeal to a broader film audience, even though they are crucial for how we will receive films in the future.

The Metaphor

The rise of new technologies, and new audiovisual and media ones in particular, has always been accompanied by metaphors associating it with the natural environment and human life. The link between the rise of psychoanalysis, spiritualism, and the introduction of cinema has often been described, including the oft-quoted assertion by philosopher Gilles Deleuze one hundred years later at the end of the twentieth century that “the brain is a screen”: we can also use audiovisual technologies to understand the workings of the human mind.

This cerebral metaphor has been revived by the rise of AI, with a new element: **the expectation that artificial superintelligences can surpass the human brain**. Where pre- and early cinematic forms were often considered a technical means to communicate with the dead and the world of spirits, in critical AI, comparisons are often drawn with the social schizoanalysis of Deleuze and Félix Guatarri and the anti-psychiatry of the 1960s. **AI’s “hallucinate,” “fabulate,” and “present delusions as real.”** In the schizo world of generative AI, chronic psychosis becomes the default mode: how can we talk about shared realities and distinguish between what is tangible and what is fabricated and fictitious in an often intentionally malevolent way?

The well-documented search of Swanson for the anti-Brando (as a sort of anti-Oedipus of our times), resulting in the grotesque liminal Loab figure, can



Intense debate at Uppsala Kortfilmfestival © Anton Isiukov

be understood as a way to analyse this machinal subconscious: what does it present you when you ask it to give you something that is not desirable, not looked-for, but quite the opposite? Is there a way to break through the ‘psychosis’ of the machine? This brings to mind a whole other meaning of “animated”: do we believe or want to believe that the machine is “alive”? And why and how so?

The Machine

Of course, as De Vries reminded us, every new technology sprouts new questions, often emotional ones, as the shock of the new can also be the unmasking of the old. Age-old playful questions may become threatening. What is it that an artist actually does? Can they be replaced by the machine? What are creation and creativity? Are humans expendable? That is somewhat reminiscent of the comparison that computational linguist Emily M. Bender and sociologist Alex Hanna make with the “Luddites” in their recently published book, *The AI Con: How to Fight Big Tech’s Hype and Create the Future We Want*. This is the term historically given to the decentralised groups of English textile workers who rebelled in the early nineteenth century against new factory-style production methods, which they saw as endangering their craft and livelihoods. Luddism has acquired a pejorative connotation and is linked to a conservative fear of technology and the associated concept of progress. But Bender and Hanna argue that the protesting workers weren’t so much rejecting the technology itself, but rather the social cost of automation. Perhaps the most important point of their plea: stop calling AI intelligent, stop desperately searching for the ghost in the machine, **stop this tendency to anthropomorphise AI, and call it what it is: automation**. The only reason the output of AI-generated texts, images, and videos can appear intelligent is because the input was, and the machines can make combinations faster than ever before.

Following the Luddites, Bender and Hanna advocate in their book for a socially centred technology, recognising the speed at which new technologies exploit and render human labour redundant. The innovation the AI industry boasts about is, in reality, nothing more than labour displacement. In Uppsala, Braun agreed: department heads won’t disappear so quickly in the film industry, but trainees, juniors, and assistants will. Yet, the way the film industry currently functions thrives precisely because people can gain experience and explore their craft under the guidance of experienced filmmakers. A common question is how someone can become a head of film if they haven’t first learned the craft. At the same time, Braun admitted that these kinds of questions about film on an industrial scale naturally don’t apply to independent filmmakers, who often rely on their own resources anyway. New technology can, in fact, have both qualitative and quantitative effects there. However, this does not alter the fact that these AIs are also trained by extracting human data. On a more philosophical level, one could ask if the assemblage of AI is so different from those artistic and curatorial practices that use found footage and appropriation techniques.

Stop this tendency to anthropomorphise AI, and call it what it is: automation

Back to the Ghost

In their 2022 book *Movement: How to Take Back our Street and Transform our Lives*, journalist Thalia Verkade and mobility expert Marco te Brömmelstroet demonstrate how the automobile industry won the race for the public space. Our cities are designed to allow car traffic to flow quickly, even in residential areas, which has led to an increasing reduction in walking paths, play areas, and outdoor meeting places. Can we reclaim the streets from the car lobby? Will traffic jams actually be solved by building new roads, or by rethinking mobility? This parallels the unbridled growth of AI.

The very suggestion that pedestrians should compete with cars—or humans with machines—isn't neutral but fundamentally ideological. Just as the suggestion that technological progress is desirable and unstoppable exposes a technological worldview that needs to be questioned. For example, film festivals, as freeports for out-loud thinking and progressive insights, should put these questions on the agenda. A smaller workforce may seem efficient or cheaper from an economic perspective, but if that leads to higher unemployment, more bullshit jobs, and especially fewer opportunities to work in the creative industries, how democratic then is the uncontrolled insertion of AI machinery in human and creative processes?

I'm not sure if something like ethical AI is even possible under the present circumstances, but until we've explored it from the perspective of the people who make up society, I advocate for both transparency and a quality mark. And insight into climate and other hidden costs. And not after the fact, like we are still trying to establish in the cases of food and energy, but right away. It will foster the courage to question the pre-emptive adaptation to the demands of tech industries and the companies that rule them. Without these questions, in my view, the questions about AI in animation and the film industry in general remain speculative. Our physical world is too valuable to ignore and is made suspicious or "forgotten" in the flood of animated images whose status we no longer know or understand.

2.

The Authors

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2.

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3.

About

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ESFN & This Is Short

The **European Short Film Network (ESFN)**, founded in 2018, brings together six renowned festivals with three main objectives: to collaborate on sustainable and resilient visions for the (short) film landscape; to enhance access to content, knowledge, and expertise for partners and professionals; and to develop innovative platforms for European short films. Its year-round streaming service, **THIS IS SHORT**, launched 2023 and globally available, offers a curated selection of *fascinating films, curated by fabulous festivals*. Operated as a non-profit and co-financed by the Creative Europe MEDIA programme, the service is aimed at festival audiences, cinephiles, and filmmakers worldwide.

Talking Shorts

As a magazine dedicated to short films, **Talking Shorts** aims to create a wider discourse about this often-overlooked art form. The outlet strives to produce universally readable content that can inspire, cultivate, and educate a broad range of audiences, from students and scholars to non-cinephile readers, in an attempt to connect filmmakers, audiences, festival organisers, and a young generation of film lovers. Since 2023, Talking Shorts has been the official outlet of **The European Network for Film Discourse (The END)**, which comprises eight diverse European film festivals and is funded by the Creative Europe MEDIA Programme. Talking Shorts' publications are closely connected to the film festival landscape.

4.

Partners & Imprint

4.

Partners

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INDIELISBOA

VIENNA SHORTS

25 FPS FESTIVAL

Uppsala Kortfilmfestival

THIS IS SHORT

talking shorts

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