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Engaging new audiences with old and new experimental film: The E*Cinema Academy film series at EYE Filmmuseum

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In 2012 EYE, the former Nederlands Filmmuseum, moved to its new building, gaining two additional theatres and an exhibition venue. This allowed increasing the frequency of exhibitions, their variety, and the flow of visitors, in line with the expectations of current cultural and fund polices. In a couple of years, EYE shifted from mainly a cinephile's place to an institution directed to a broader public.

In 2012, film programmer Anna Abrahams (also filmmaker and teacher at the Royal Academy of Art), experimental film curator Simona Monizza, and Expanded Cinema senior curator Mark-Paul Meyer initiated the series E*Cinema Academy (hereafter E*Cinema), intending to reflect on experimental filmmaking and to try out new presentation forms for classic and contemporary experimental films. What follows is a producer's perspective on the project. The series was meant to engage new and young audiences with the difficult genre of experimental film and its history. For this, it adopted a multiform curatorial model, drawing from the resources of the filmmuseum and from contemporary audiovisual and exhibition practices. The production and exhibition of old and new experimental films widely expanded to digital platforms and gallery/museum organisations, departing from traditional spatio-temporal qualities of cinema/film experiences, while also generating new artistic endeavours. In the following paragraph I shortly describe one of the E*Cinema programs, to give an impression of the kind of experiences proposed by EYE. Then I move to a broader contemplation of the curatorship of E*Cinema.



Fig. 1: Still from *Thaïs* by Anton Giulio Bragaglia.

On 9 September 2014, EYE inaugurated the third edition of E*Cinema, with a film program on Futurism, a movement that encompassed different art forms, although only marginally film. A compilation program, developed in collaboration with *film and media* scholar *Wanda Strauven*, author of *Marinetti e il cinema: tra attrazione e sperimentazione*, aimed at illustrating the historical context of this Italian artistic movement. It included films and fragments – mostly from the EYE collection – conceived in the 1910s and related to the Futurist ideas or later productions inspired by the same poetics. Those were *Le Due Innamorate di Cretinetti* (1911), a vaudeville comedy, a genre appreciated by the Futurists; a recording of the early car tests on the roof of the Fiat factory (1925); *Conversation with Boxing Gloves* by Rosane Chamecki, Andrea Lerner, and Phil Hardera (2010), a reinterpretation of a segment from *Vita Futurista* (1916); *La marche des machines* (1928) by *Eugène Deslaw*, glorifying factory machines and modernity; *Combat de boxe* by *Charles Dekeukeleire* (1927), a film rich in visual and editing experiments to enhance the speed and violence of a box fight. The program concluded with the Dutch premiere of the only Futurist film that survived: *Thaïs* by Anton Giulio Bragaglia (1917), with live musical accompaniment by the Dutch musician and performer *Professor Russolo*, whose stage name was inspired by the futurist *Luigi Russolo*.

*Thaïs had just been restored by the George Eastman House and finally put into circulation on a Blu-Ray. The abstract and expressionistic visualisations of Thaïs inspired successive filmmakers of French and German avant-gardes also presented within E*Cinema. But the screening was not limited to the projection of films. Professor Russolo played music on his own Intonarumori, an interpretation of Luigi Russolo's famous noise generator, and performed his 'futurist' sketches between the shorts and at the beginning of the program when he noisily summoned the public from the halls of EYE to the cinema. Additionally, Anna Abrahams gave a lecture about the program content.*



Video-documentation of the program 'Futurist Cinema'.

From its start until 2015, E*Cinema[1] consisted of two kinds of events running biweekly: the *Masters of the Avant-garde* and the *Researchlabs*. The former presented a film canon showcasing the history of experimental film, at times in connection to other events, such as a specific film retrospective/exhibition, the visit of a scholar/artist, books, or a new film restoration. The original idea was to complete, in the period 2013-2017, a list of 100 titles that would inform young generations about the main achievements in the history of experimental film, starting from film art movements such as Dada, Surrealism, Beat, Pop, etc. Such a corpus would reflect the knowledge and interests of the EYE curators and constitute a reference for the curatorial team, which could then further differentiate its programming toward less obvious and more controversial titles.[2] This format was inspired by the canon *Was ist Film* (1996-) of the Austrian Filmmuseum, where classics stand along minor titles, and where attention is given to the materiality of the screening formats, respecting the intentions of the authors regarding their artistic medium (e.g. Jaap Pieters'

Super 8mm films projected by the filmmaker himself; the re-enactments of the performances *Man with Mirror* by Guy Sherwin and *Horror Film* by Malcolm Le Grice). Whenever possible, the series intended to present classics on a big screen and on film.[3] In the case of many experimental films this materiality is often essential to their understanding and experiencing, as artistic qualities and meanings rely on the artefact of the film medium and on the film projection, which can be performative and expanded. Projection and film stock, however, are becoming rare.

In the Netherlands in 2012, the partly publicly-funded digitalisation program *Cinema Digitaal* brought together twenty Dutch independent distributors and six major American studios to sponsor the transition from analogue to digital technology in most Dutch cinemas. This granted cinemas state-of-the-art screening facilities and allowed distributors to show their newest productions on standardised digital carriers, but also decreased the number of screenings of 16mm and 35mm films. The question arising here is whether *Cinema Digitaal* will constrain the variety in film programming, including minor genres, old titles, and the medium of film. These seem to increasingly pertain exclusively to film museums and special events, with facilities enabling projections of any kind of film format and thus presenting a wider history of film. Already in 2008, David Francis argued that ‘by the time we get to 2050, [...] people will be coming to the filmmuseum to see a film projected in ideal circumstances, and it will get an aura about it, the same sort of aura you get when coming to see an original Goya’.[4] In this way and in times where there is a lot of talk about another death of film both as medium, collective experience, and dominant narrative means (Cherchi Usai, Sontag, Scorsese, Greenaway, et al.), film would paradoxically acquire the long-wished status of an art form, and film museums would re-assert their uniqueness as sites of expertise in film art and heritage. If, after Barbara Herrnstein Smith, canonisation processes are always reducible to economies of self-interest,[5] E*Cinema could be perceived to aim at presenting a film canon to underline the specificity of the film art medium and in the context of a film museum.



Fig. 2: Still from Guy Sherwin's performance *Man with Mirror*.

E*Cinema Academy is [...] a meeting place for anyone interested in film as an art form. One half of the series follows a historical path, with highlights from the avant-garde, as well as films made by visual artists. The other half is curated by art academies and universities that are responding to the current interests and needs of film as an audiovisual art form. There is no venue in the Netherlands that screens the canon of experimental film on a regular basis, yet EYE is able to fill this void, thanks to its extensive private collection and its partnerships with other international film archives. Each programme will begin with a lecture, music, or short performance, and will be followed by a discussion.

This definition of E*Cinema from 2012 stressed upon proposing a first canon of experimental film in the Netherlands. Although several venues in the country were and are involved with the screening of experimental films, this was never conceived in a canon or a cycle.[6] However, the framing of the canonical *Un Chien Andalou* in three consecutive editions, within three distinct focuses, on Surrealism, Mexico, and the dream team Buñuel/Dalí, reveals a key point of departure of E*Cinema from previous canons. Every year, new historical or thematic contextualisations accompanied the masterpieces and allowed EYE to show the minor and unknown content of its archive to a broader public. At the same time, E*Cinema gave the curators the pretext to expand the number of the international experimental classics within the EYE

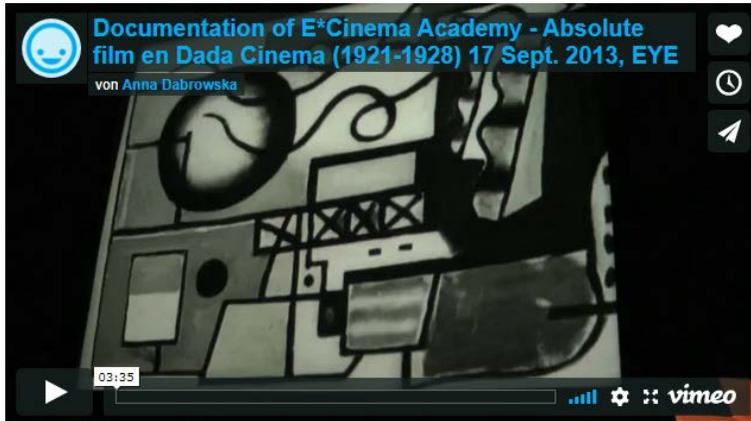
archive with new acquisitions and restorations (in 2012 approximately half of the titles were leased from other organisations).



Video-documentation of Yvo Verschoor playing the pianola score by George Antheil for Ballet Mécanique.

A broader comprehensibility and public attendance of E*Cinema programs were also triggered by juxtaposing masterpieces to contemporary artistic and cultural productions. To this end, the curatorial strategy of E*Cinema comprised a number of different activities, such as re-enactment, reinterpretation, interviewing, recycling and historical comparison, employing other audiovisual shorts/fragments, musical accompaniments, performances, lectures and moving image installations; these all stimulated the dialogue between the past and the present.[7] The combination of old and new works is seen by EYE as an essential condition for a living film museum that matters in the present and in the future.[8] This curatorial philosophy and exhibition policy has been adopted by EYE since the 1980s, when attention was granted to the margins of film history and to different dispositifs. Giovanna Fossati, Professor of Film Heritage and Digital Film Culture and EYE Chief Curator, identified four theoretical and practical frameworks in film archival and exhibition activities. Inspired by Jean-Louis Baudry's apparatus theory, Fossati's *film as dispositif* framework defines the film identity as a 'variable that realises itself only within a dispositif, a situation if you wish, where the film meets its user'.[9] Endorsing the argument that 'showing a film within a different dispositif than its historical one becomes an equally important alternative',[10] E*Cinema placed its canon in a historical context, as well as in the perspective of the spectators: the aim of the series was not just to share the

material, aesthetic, and historical qualities of masterpieces, but to enhance their meaningfulness and enjoyability for contemporary audiences.[11]



Video-documentation of Nora Muldey's piano performance for the program Absolute Film and Dada Cinema.

In line with EYE's policy, E*Cinema promoted a renewal of film as a hybrid art form.[12] The multisensorial and aesthetic qualities of the experimental titles were stressed and broadened to other art forms. Such an interdisciplinary strategy helped EYE to make a difficult film genre more comprehensive and to attract larger audiences with interests in arts and fields other than film. Finally, by *performing* its canon, E*Cinema wanted to bestow uniqueness and liveness to its programs, which were unrepeatably at home, in classes, and traditional black box cinemas: the spatio-temporal and aesthetic qualities of film projection, the collective cinema experience, accompanied by other media and live arts provided a character of 'originality' and exceptionality to the screenings of classic and minor titles.

The second kind of E*Cinema events, the *Researchlabs*, challenged students and Dutch PhD candidates to explore the analogue and digital collections of EYE and other institutions, by letting them curate and present programs and create their own found footage works. In this process, students were guided by a teacher in a curatorial or videomaking course and assisted by the EYE curator, programmer, and producer. The output fed the public *Researchlab* programs screened at EYE, substantially attended by young generations, attracted through the participants' networks.

The students' curatorial choices were completely free from any canonical or historical discourses. However, students were invited to follow the *Masters*

of the *Avant-garde*, to become acquainted with the history of experimental film and to possibly draw or move forward from it. The early *Research-labs* mainly focused on experimental film history and featured, for example: Japanese avant-garde works from the 1960s in dialogue with those from the 2000s; a focus on Filmliga (1920s, 1930s); an expanded cinema dome with Stan VanDerBeek and Harry Smith's films (1950s, 1960s); Ken Jacobs' *Tom, Tom the Piper's Son* (1969-1971) and a focus on early cinema studies. With the years, students gradually proposed programs increasingly featuring contemporary works and their own creations (the best of which were acquired for the EYE collection). The format also included other art forms and disciplines, giving room, for example, to students' installations, which increasingly gained attention among young artists and curators and were shown both within and outside the EYE cinemas.



Video-documentation of the program *Cinema as Mind* curated by Flora Lysen.

With students as film makers, researchers, and curators of E*Cinema, the knowledge and practices regarding the archive, program, technique, communication, and production workflows were taught to them, giving them a unique opportunity to professionally engage with an established cultural institution and to share with the public their works in an artistically meaningful and enjoyable way. At the same time, EYE established new collaborations with academies and opened its collections to emerging interpretations and uses. This aimed to socially and culturally diffuse old and new experimental film and make the EYE archive relevant to the youngest generations of artists and curators, who were enabled to critically and artistically elaborate on film and history during their curatorial processes.

From a practical perspective, such reflections were facilitated by the interplay between analogue and digital technologies, and such interplay allowed the *Researchlabs* to develop on a large scale (e.g. digital previews helped the conception/selection of the programs and the performers' preparations; projection tests helped to arrange the film compilations, taking into account time perception, the screen size, the different aspect ratios, the film colors, the darkness of the cinema, and spatial distractions).

The participatory curatorship of the *Researchlabs* wished to grant diversity to E*Cinema: the canon of the EYE curators co-existed with the films proposed by emerging curators, filmmakers, and artists, contributing to a broader, more inclusive writing of film history. E*Cinema would endorse an institutional practice that can be situated between old and new praxes, in line with what Kirshenblatt-Gimblett stated:

Museums were once defined by their relationship to objects: curators were *keepers* and their greatest asset was their collections. Today, they are defined more than ever by their relationship to visitors.

E*Cinema attempted to design a curatorial strategy to engage audiences and emerging filmmakers/curators/artists with the filmmuseum, the archive, and the genre of experimental film. The strategy was based on bringing together film history and contemporary artistic achievements, by embracing new audiovisual technologies and presentation formats, and by inviting emerging voices to publicly express themselves at EYE.



Video-documentation of the installation *Sentient Chandelier* by Robin van Creij.

Since the 1990s the art world has been progressively turning toward film, thanks in part to the arrival of digital technology. This contributes to the heterogeneity and variability of contemporary cinematic practices amidst a multimedia environment and testifies to a renewed vitality and reinvention of the cinema.[13] In 2015, E*Cinema was enlarged and renamed EYE on Art, emphasising the turn of EYE toward the art world. EYE on Art focuses even more than E*Cinema on the encounter of cinema with other arts; it places the spotlight on contemporary visual artists and filmmakers presented in the main exhibition venue, by hosting their talks and selected film programs in the cinema. *Researchlabs* and *Masters of the Avant-garde* still form part of EYE on Art, with the former now being a festival awarding the best curated program and the best new audiovisual work; and *Masters of the Avant-garde* is reduced to sporadic programs on avant-garde movements and on affirmed experimental filmmakers visiting EYE (e.g. Bauhaus, Frans Zwartjes, Pat O’Neill). Although, the programs and the list of the *Masters’* titles were curtailed, they represented an interesting curatorial case, which strategically presented a minor film collection to the public and simultaneously pointed out the medium specificity and hybridity of film, while discerning the unique idiosyncrasy of a film museum in comparison to other art institutions.

Anna Dabrowska (EYE Film Institute Netherlands)

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Notes

- [1] A series, called just E*Cinema, took place already in the 2000s in the Nederlands Filmmuseum but it did not involve academies and it featured less screenings and attendances.
- [2] Interview conducted by the author with Mark-Paul Meyer on 16 December 2014.
- [3] Ibid.

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- [4] Cherchi Usai & Francis & Horwath & Loebenstein 2008, p. 21.
- [5] Herrnstein Smith 1983, pp. 22-23.
- [6] Among those which contributed to a significant production, distribution, and exhibition of experimental film in Holland were the Filmliga (1920s), who introduced European and Russian avant-garde in Dutch theatres; the Exprmntl Festival in Knokke-le-Zoute (Belgium, five editions between 1949 and 1974) where international film (many titles were successively acquired by the Dutch Filmmuseum), art, theatre, and music mingled; the Electric Cinema (managed by Barbara Meter, 1969-1973) hosting many international artists in the country, and the related Dutch Filmmakers Co-op; and many others including the Arnhem and Rotterdam Film Festival, focused on worldwide independent, innovative, and experimental cinema. A relevant project has been the foundation of the Filmbank (2002), a distribution house of Dutch experimental films, spanning from 1960 until recently, thereby trying to write a national history of this genre. In 2010 it merged with the rest of the EYE experimental film collection.
- [7] Interview conducted by the author with Simona Monizza on 18 November 2014.
- [8] Eye Policy 2017-2020, p. 19.
- [9] Fossati 2009, p. 127.
- [10] Ibid.
- [11] Interview conducted by the author with Anna Abrahams on 25 November 2014.
- [12] Eye Policy 2017-2020, p. 6.
- [13] Balsom 2013, pp. 17, 25.