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### Learning To Become An Older Socially Engaged Filmmaker; Why And How

The EU Project RefugeesIn, cinema for refugee social inclusion has been embracing an array of activities among which searching for films about refugees and their commitment. This activity, however, was performed with an explicit goal in mind: to find and select films, featuring refugees as role models, the kind of role models that could inspire both the today's refugee newcomers and their hosts and help alleviate stereotypes about socially marginalised groups in general, about *people whose story is not known to us and is yet to be known.* "Knowing other people's stories transforms strangers into close people" argued Žižek in one of his public appearances. In our cinema projects we were interested in real life stories and how to transform them into scripts and films.

It has been generally admitted that cinema, both feature and documentary films, is one of most popular social cultural practices of the 21st century, conveying images of marginalized social groups; films tell the audience how to understand members of marginalized social groups, individuals and groups, how to think about them and how to behave when in contact with them.

Films have the power to either consolidate or alleviate enduring stereotypes about refugees as being all from rural background, low educated, poor, having lots of children, stealing jobs from local inhabitants, being "undermench", being a great threat to the host community. Such stereotypes are primitive thinking patterns and therefore Ultimately, they can "wash out bad consciousness", when there is no or insufficient readiness of the host society members to get engaged with this currently overwhelming social issue.

## The role of cinema projects and social engagement

At Slovenian Third Age University two consecutive transnational projects (CINAGE, European cinema for active ageing, and RefugeesIN, European cinema for social refugee social inclusion) have helped conceptualizing a new study orientation related to cinema and social engagement. This also helped developing new educational practices. Hence, joining our *socially engaged education* [1] for older people are two topics: *the role of cinema in adult education* and *socially engaged filmmaking* of older people.

In the *RefugeesIn, cinema for refugees social inclusion project*, we screened many films and selected 12 of them as best portraying refugee role models having a number of qualities, i.e.:

- (1) Having passion and ability to inspire others;
- (2) Having a clear set of values and living them;
- (3) Being committed to community;
- (4) Demonstrating altruism towards others while accepting them;
- (5) Having the ability to overcome obstacles and take initiative:

Searching for such films, we finally came across **Das Kind**, a film that was best meeting our needs and purpose and that similarly increased our understanding of

- (1) what lifelong *social engagement* is
- (2) how social engagement shapes individual and collective social identity,
- (3) to what extent commitment supports refugee integration.

*Das Kind* is a film by French-Israeli director Yonathan Levy, offering a cinematically creative approach to storytelling, which includes photo projections and theatrically

set inputs performed by Irma's granddaughter Sarah, bringing Irma's memories to life. The film won Europe's Best Independent Film Award at the ECU.

The film is a kind of docu - drama featuring the story of the 95-year old Irma Miko, a cultured and accomplished member of Europe's intelligentsia, a pianist, a woman with a past. Born in Czernowitz, she joined the communist youth which was prohibited and was put in prison by the age of 19.

In 2008, together with her son André, Irma set out on an emotional journey across Europe in search of her past and her old companions which resulted in a poetic and deeply moving account of a vanishing world and a portrait of an extraordinary brave and engaged woman who risked everything during one of the darkest chapters in history. *But Irma is a portrait of an engaged woman and a portrait of a permanent refugee.*

A Jew and a communist, Irma joined the French Resistance in Paris in 1941. Her unimaginably dangerous assignment was to approach occupying German soldiers and persuade them to join the Resistance. Hans, whom Irma meets in Paris after 62 years, was such a soldier, a soldier who had never asked himself, why he had to come to Paris, what was the goal of the German Government. He ended up working for the French resistance movement.

Irma was stopped in Paris on her way to Spain with a task connected with the Spanish Civil War. She found herself refugee in France after leaving Czernowitz under the German occupation, leaving behind her communist past.

Being a Jew she was not Romanian, neither was she Austrian, nor French or *was she a part of all that? Refugees are not comfortable with the issues of identity and belonging.*

Her music was not *their* music, her poetry was not *their* poetry. Their light and noises and were different from hers.

»My darling, even today I do not feel entirely French. But who am I? Romanian, Austrian? French? A part of each....” she asked her son André Moreover, she does not even have a language of her own: Yiddish, German, French, which language is her language?

She says that she never felt entirely French, though her second husband was French, though her children were born and raised in Paris. So, where is Irma’s home? In Austria, Romania, Israel and why are refugees expected to get integrated, to nest their new home in the new country? *A refugee remains a refugee not really knowing where his or her home is. He or she is always from elsewhere.* The feeling of being homeless, of being “from elsewhere” is usually transmitted onto the refugees’ children. The story of their parents, the anxieties of their parents become *their* anxieties even before they are born. Thus, being a refugee is about transmission of certain culture and feelings onto the next generations. It takes several generations for these feelings to get lost, if ever.

A refugee does not necessarily adjust to society he or she should adjust to. Thus, all her life Irma has been a resistant, ready to make sacrifice for her ideas. This readiness of her natures also her state of refugee. *Belonging is a question of attitude.*

Her story makes the audience understand that at time refugees ask themselves what they would have become if they had taken another decision, have ended up in another country, since certain cultures mean poverty, injustice, other wealth, art, beauty, peace, social justice.

*Socially engaged education* may take on different images. In our case it started by screening twelve European films and discussing them, while *socially engaged filmmaking* encourages learners’ social engagement in real life situations. Making a film has its intrinsic educational value, and is in itself a real life situation.

Selecting and screening films related to refugee problematics three categories of films were identified: those which focus on the refugee problematics as

humanitarian catastrophe, (Terra ferma), those which deal with the topic in a funny, amusing way, (African doctor) and those, rare ones that have a real message, a message to follow (Fatima).

There are other marginalized social groups - and older people are among them-that are *not expected nor encouraged and are not likely to participate in the so called active life*, which shapes identity in middle adulthood. Moreover, they have less access to public places, which is crucial to feel human and included.

### **What is social engagement and why socially engaged education of older people**

It has been generally admitted that there are social issues which have to be pointed at and require common action and social engagement. Today, unavoidably social engagement has to do with *public communication*. It is believed to be "*socially responsive attitude towards communication*", *having effects on individual, community, civic and institutional level i.e. on both individual and collective level*. Of course it can also be services offered to community, it can be active citizenship (caring for public matters) etc.

Social engagement is to have individual and collective dimension what requires understanding and knowledge of what social engagement is. To this end learning by doing can be a method of choice in addition to cognitive learning.

Older people's education can not be neutral and aseptic since *all issues around us are our issues*, are older people's issues simply because we are all members of society. Hence, all social issues need to be addressed both in education and real life. Moreover, education of older people *is meant to be inclusive and if it is socially engaged there is every chance that it becomes inclusive*.

Additionally, against the unstable social background, older adult education needs to be progressive, ambitious, demanding, turned towards both present and future as to consolidate older people's social value and combat negative social stereotypes about them (they are supposedly slow learners, if learners at all; they attend educational courses just to socialise and structure their time; they learn to kill their

time, and not necessarily by meaningful activities; their gaining knowledge is just an amusement that has never changed anyone, not themselves nor society...

Socially engaged educational and learning activities have, as already mentioned, an effect on the individual level on collective level. Learners or their (social) group become visible and the meaning of their learning and purpose become better understood. Their lives get more interconnected with the lives of others which is condition sine qua non for being integrated in society.

Socially engaged educational and learning activities become meaningful through processes that are socially situated.

Living in a world of constant and rapid change, everybody regardless of their age or social status, should keep learning, upgrading or transforming their knowledge and competencies (knowledge, skills, disciplinary knowledge, beliefs validated by the use) thinking of the present and future social developments.

Social engagement and learning are about taking action in concert with others as well as about humanising ourselves by common acting. In public space, we discover our public self, what we have, what we do not have, and who we are, this being possible solely in relation to others (Arendt, 1993).

### **Socially engaged film making**

Let me illustrate this Hannah Arendt's view on public space and activity by the examples of the two cinema projects, CINAGE and RefugeesIN. In both cases learning about society and making films was intergenerational (which was a learning and integrating experience in itself). The active ageing topic of CINAGE gave voice to older learners- an opportunity to express themselves, to communicate who they are and what they are able to do. They themselves presented CINAGE in the International Festival of Knowledge and Culture in Later life, at different festivals, in transnational meetings, to students of andragogy etc.

In the CASE of RefugeesIN social engagement was even more visible. The learning group constituted a micro society where attitudes towards refugees differed a lot. Learning in such a group, dealing with social issues and intending to communicate the results of the learning in public to broader audience through radio programmes and other public appearances is transformative learning on individual and collective level wanting to induce at least small scale changes.

Finally, cinema. Cinema is above all an encounter extending our individual world to something broader. In order for socially engaged film making to be effective and the message of the film to be understood, making a film and screening it requires knowing the character and elements of *cinematographic text*.

In addition, a film should feature what is known and what is unknown and the gap between the two should not be too wide. If this is the case, cinema stimulates learning and creates the desire to learn argues Susa (2016). It sharpens perception of individual and social issues and makes it more alert. It contributes to the viewers/learners' understanding of diversity. In order to interpret the content of a cinematographic text, the individual features of the film language need to be identified. One should bear in mind that in cinema the perceptual screening is what shapes understanding. Therefore pedagogy of the image requires the learners and adult educators to understand the language of images and the language of sounds – that is the audio-visual text. (Susa, 2016). This understanding is best achieved by learning by doing.

### **Conclusion**

Today social engagement is needed since major social issues concern all social groups and individuals. Social engagement also demonstrates the wish to live together, to bind dispersed individuals, to achieve better social cohesion. From birth on man is related to society. Not only does he need social protection against hardships, he also vitally needs to be recognized, recognition by others being a source of his identity as well as a source of his human existence. Social binding being fragile, it has to be consolidated as often as possible.

Hence, socially engaged film making is one of the ways to better social cohesion. CINAGE and RefugeesIN, two international cinema projects are an example of socially responsive communication and building socially responsible attitude towards social issues.

In order to convey and/or understand the message of the films made, pedagogy of the image took place within the two projects requiring the learners and adult educators to understand and use the language of images and the language of sounds – that is the audio-visual text.

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[1] Among current most typical educational programmes are critical geragogy, advocacy of older people, silver economy and ageism, digital inclusion of older people etc.