

Festival Review

Under the Eyes of the Owl: The 48th Ottawa International Animation Festival

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Looking back at the 48th edition of the Ottawa International Animation Festival (OIAF), which took place in Ottawa from September 20 to 24, 2023, I keep returning to one of Canadian animator Pierre Hébert's reflections on animation: "I am more interested in what animation does to the perception of reality and to the perception of other types of images than in what it does by itself. I am more fascinated by the effects it produces than in the worlds it creates" (Hébert, qtd. in Wells and Hardstaff 2008, 73). Thinking alongside Hébert, I wonder: how does an animation film festival, such as the OIAF, affect the world and the communities within which it exists? What does it do to the world and to the perception of reality of those that it touches?

One part of this question, of course, and perhaps the most immediate one—particularly from the perspective of an independent filmmaker, film scholar, and avid film festival goer such as myself—is how film festivals, in general, provide ample opportunity to showcase (from the filmmaker's perspective), and to see (from the public perspective) a wide range of films which you would not, otherwise, generally speaking, be able to exhibit or watch. Chris Robinson, the OIAF's artistic director, concurs:

Animation festivals are essential because we are putting the spotlight on animators . . . Despite all of the things that have changed over the years—the rise of streaming services and Vimeo and YouTube and whatnot—unless you know what you're looking for, the only place you're going to find a lot of this work is still at animation festivals. (Dart 2022)

Thinking alongside Dina Iordanova and Marijke de Valck (Iordanova 2009, 26), the first layer in thinking through the ramifications and reverberations of the Ottawa International Animation Festival in the world can be its potentiality as an alternative exhibition venue or circuit.

Founded in 1975 by the Canadian Film Institute, with a first edition in 1976, the Ottawa International Animation Festival is, alongside the Annecy International Animation Film Festival in France and the World Festival of Animated Film Zagreb in Croatia, one of the oldest and most prestigious animation film festivals, while also being the first major international animation film festival in North America. Entirely dedicated to animation, and based in Ottawa, a city recognized as an animation hub since the early days of the National Film Board, the OIAF has succeeded in creating a long-lasting animation film festival at the fruitful intersection between independent, commercial, and student animation—striving to maintain its experimental and artistic core, even while embracing industry productions and players.

It is at this intersection that the kernel of the Ottawa International Animation Festival seems to reside. On the one hand, we have one of the most interesting and valuable aspects of film festivals in general, and animation film festivals in particular. Frequently, particularly in terms of independent productions, exhibition and distribution in the film festival circuit is how the film will have a wider circulation. This is even truer considering animation, which, as Robinson pointed out, often gets sidelined in general (which is to say, live-action) film festivals. On the other hand, the presence of commissioned pieces and more established animated works, either being exhibited or a topic of conversation at one of the talks, conferences, or workshops, as well as the student works and their lively presence, bridge the gap between the many facets of the animation world and its inhabitants and community.

And it is quite a community, in and of itself. The growth and expansion of the festival through the years can be measured in numbers: once biannual, as much as every animation film festival at the time, the festival began having annual editions from the mid-1990s onward. Submissions have increased from around 750 films every couple of years to the current 2,500 per year, from 85 countries. New categories have also been added, as the festival evolved with the industry's practices, tendencies, and concerns. Finally, the festival offers spaces for the larger community to congregate within its many venues throughout the city.

In its 48th edition, the festival had seven competitive sections—feature films, short films, VR, animated series, young audiences, teen audiences, and Canadian student competitions—in addition to the non-competitive Panoramas and special screenings. Of nearly 1,000 submissions received from Canada and elsewhere, 25 Canadian student films were selected for the Canadian student competition. Amongst these, seven films were directed by Concordia students: *A Body Transgressive* (2023), by Charlie Galea McClure; *Abby* (2023), by Fanny Lord-Bourcier; *An Ego and I* (2023), by Jesu Medina; *Ruins of Equinox* (2023), by Philippe Shewchenko; *Synodic* (2023), by Rebecca Devitt; *The Clock Is Ticking* (2023), by Thibault Picquoin, and *سَلْدَنَآلْ اءَاثَر* (*Lament of Andalusia*) (2023), by Anas M'birkou. The NBC Universal Award for Best Canadian Student Animation went to *Between You and Me*, direct-

ed by Cameron Kletke, from the Emily Carr University of Art + Design, and two honourable mentions were bestowed to Shewchenko's *Ruins of Equinox*, and *Bliss*, directed by Nadya Aubrey, from Université du Québec à Montréal.

Complementing the experience of the student crowd—and at this point, I am keenly reminded of my festival-going days as a communications undergraduate and animation-lover, and can completely and giddily relate—the 48th OIAF also instituted The Animation Exposé, which is a mix of industry and general public events that offer glimpses of the behind-the-scenes work of several current animated shows and artists' processes, including an event with Luke Pearson, creator of *Hilda*; a presentation by *Nimona*'s directors, Nick Bruno and Troy Quane; a talk by Masaaki Yuasa about his body of work and creative process; and sketching activities, recruiting opportunities, and career workshops.

On the industry side of OIAF, The Animation Conference (TAC), established in 2004, is a networking and business forum, and operates much as a film festival market, in which animation industry professionals (screenwriters, producers, directors, distributors, sales agents) have one-on-one meetings and present pitches of their current projects and screenings. The festival points out how TAC, and the space it provides for industry networking, impacts the public (and our world) at large, in the sense that it represents the first step in bringing to life animated works that will be part of our lives and imaginaries. It brings me back, momentarily, to the questions tentatively formulated at the beginning of this review, and how the reflection on how animation, and the animation film festival, affect the perception of reality, actually begins here, too. What will we watch three or four years from now, and how will it transform our realities? Furthermore, as an underlying current to this entire thought and discussion: where are we on the urgent and necessary work of having more diverse voices creating worlds and telling stories?

One of the few films already on my to-watch list when I went to the festival was *Nayola* (2022), one of the seven feature films selected for OIAF's 2023 official competition. Directed by José Miguel Ribeiro, the film is a Portugal, France, Belgium, and Netherlands co-production, and tells the story of three generations of women, Lelena, Nayola, and Yara, whose lives are shaped by the 25-year-long Angolan civil war. Beautiful and poignant in its narrative and aesthetic experimentations, the film traverses times and spaces, fantasy and reality, in telling the lives of these women and the rising country around them. I selected *Nayola* specifically because I was intrigued by its use of different animation techniques and visual registers, and because it was the only film present in the festival's lineup whose protagonists were Black (even though the director is not Black). As a matter of fact, locating films in OIAF's program directed by Black or Indigenous people, or those in which the protagonists were Black or Indigenous, or those which were produced in Afro-diasporic countries, yielded few results, much to my disappointment, particularly within an animation film festival with the stature and longevity of Ottawa's. Much as Janet Harbord indicates, "Festivals act as turnstiles in the largely invisible flow of trade in cultural goods, throwing into relief border crossings and, less visibly, marking out certain blockades and omissions in trade routes" (Harbord 2009, 40). What are these

omissions, how exactly do they affect us all, and how do we set about undoing them?

The film that utterly caught me by surprise was *Linda veut du poulet! (Chicken for Linda!)* (2023), directed by Chiara Malta and Sébastien Laudenbach. A France and Italy co-production, this coming-of-age film is enchanting in its colourful aesthetics and in telling the story of Linda, a girl who wants a chicken for dinner, as payment for a mistake and wrongdoing of her mother's. Which should be simple enough, if it was not for the complex and delicate mother-daughter relationship, and if the situation was not even more aggravated by a general strike, and a children's revolution, all at once. Funny, heartrending, and very touching, *Linda veut du poulet!* won the Annecy Cristal in the 2023 Annecy International Animation Film Festival, as well as the Gan Foundation Award for Distribution, and the Best Animated Feature at France's César Awards, this year. This is the film I later took my seven-year-old daughter to the cinema to watch with me, and it was a joy to share with her its beauty and the delicate emotions that Linda goes through as she remembers her late father through his chicken and peppers recipe.

Interestingly enough, another one of the bright spots for me at OIAF was the young audiences 7+ competition. Perhaps I am biased, as I have a little one myself, and we do love to watch films together, particularly these odd and beautiful films that we find in animation film festivals and independent cinemas. But to be completely honest, this program felt like one of the most coherent and cohesive selections of short films from those I watched at the festival, with each work complementing and dialoguing with the others. The eight films in the program were *Aaaah!* (2023), by Osman Cerfon; *Ciranda Feiticeira* (2023), by Lula Gonzaga and Tiago Delácio; *Entre deux sœurs (To Be Sisters, 2023)*, by Clément Céard and Anne-Sophie Gousset; *Harvey* (2023), by Janice Nadeau; *Indlela Yokuphila: The Soul's Journey* (2023), by Dylan McGarry and Marc Moynihan; *Swimming with Wings* (2023), by Daphna Awadish Golan; *The Goose* (2023), by Jan Mika; and *Va-t'en, Alfred! (Go Away, Alfred!, 2023)*, by Célia Tisserant and Arnaud Demuynck. The films in this program brought forward several different, interlinked facets of childhood, ranging from all its chaos and playfulness to the discovery of the world, friendship, and difficult feelings of loss, adriftness, helplessness, and grief. The films in this program were judged by the OIAF 2023 kids jury, a team of eight- to twelve-year-old jurors, coordinated by New York-based animator and OIAF 2022 jury member, Pilar Newton-Katz. *The Goose*, by Jan Mika, received the competition award, with honourable mentions going to Awadish Golan's *Swimming with Wings* and McGarry and Moynihan's *Indlela Yokuphila: The Soul's Journey*.

The very interesting work being done by the Ottawa International Animation Festival in regards to young audiences—which encompass both children and teenagers (who are represented by the teen audiences 13+ competition)—is complemented by the festival's function as a window to a broader spectrum of animation filmmaking, but with a very directed scope around themes pertinent to these ages and this audience's particular interests. Moreover, the festival cultivates the exercise of critical thinking and creation through the many workshops available for children and teens. Returning to our initial questions, these are all modalities of the affective

possibilities not only of animation, but of an animation film festival of the scope of OIAF, and one with the vision of maintaining the several communities that it locates at the centre of its activities and programs.

References

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