



**European Children's
Film Association**

Association Européenne du Cinéma
pour l'Enfance et la Jeunesse

interviews

Goat Girl

ECFA Awards

ECFA member: Benshi

**Olivia and the Invisible
Earthquake**

**Horror Film Elements
in Children's Film**



Journal

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THE MATURATION PROCESS

For ECFA, 2025 was a year of 'continuity shaped by transition'. While we continued with our usual activities, the year was marked by reflection on how the association works, the conditions for sustaining our activities, and our responsibilities towards ECFA's role within the European children's film landscape.

This moment of transition has everything to do with the retirement of Felix Vanginderhuysen. For decades, Felix's commitment and personal dedication formed a cornerstone for ECFA. His contribution shaped not only structures and practices but also a culture of trust, openness, and continuity. Entering a post-Felix era sets the responsibility for the board and the members to make a conscious shift toward transparency and collective stewardship.

Throughout 2025, ECFA continued to act as a platform for exchange and cooperation. Professional encounters such as the Workshop Warehouse in Bologna, the ECFA Exchange in Chemnitz, and the D4K training at IDFA, where ECFA people played a central role, reaffirmed the value of shared knowledge in a field that remains structurally underfunded and often underestimated. At the same time, the year made the limits of informal structures and personalised workloads very visible, highlighting the need for more sustainable models of organisation and communication.

These reflections were not abstract; they translated into concrete internal processes: the launch of

a Code of Conduct, intensive discussions on governance and workload, and an honest assessment of ECFA's communication tools and capacities. Progress was uneven, and not all intentions resulted in immediate change. Yet, this openness about limitations is part of a necessary maturation process for an association that has grown in size, visibility, and responsibility.

One theme connecting many of ECFA's activities is care: care for young audiences, for professionals working under fragile conditions, for diversity of voices, and for ethical responsibility within film culture. Our collective understanding views cinema not only as cultural production but as a space of shared responsibility — and sharing is caring!

This Journal accompanies a moment in which ECFA is neither reinventing itself nor standing still. It reflects an organisation in motion: grounded in long-term commitment, attentive to its own structures, and conscious of the broader cultural and political context in which it operates. The path ahead will require time, dialogue, and collective engagement. As always, ECFA's strength lies not in individual actions but in the shared effort of its members to sustain meaningful film culture for children and young people across Europe and beyond. I'm sure that the ECFA crowd is and will remain a critical mass for this cause for the years to come.

—
Pantelis Panteloglou, ECFA President

Ana Asensio about GOAT GIRL

“The underlying forces that are already emerging”

However small she may be, Elena is at a turning point in her life. Her first communion is supposed to be her introduction to spiritual life, but an encounter with Serezade brings her into contact with a more worldly existence. Her friendship with the traveller girl, who dances in the streets and plays with her goat, triggers new insights in the introverted Elena, who has just been introduced to the transience of life for the first time.

Director Ana Asensio combines in GOAT GIRL the severity of Spanish traditions in Madrid in 1988 with the foreshadowing of a more exuberant future for Elena, an obedient girl with big, friendly eyes.

Seeing the opening scene, something tells me that as a child, you were familiar with the nervous wait before going on stage.

Ana Asensio: As a five-year-old, my mom signed me up for ballet. I have a vague memory of a big performance we did in a theatre that was larger than anything I could imagine. The

scene returns to that moment of suddenly feeling exposed to a different kind of gaze. People weren't looking at you as just another little kid, but as someone who is put up on a stage, under a spotlight, doing something that requires the adult's attention.

Poor Elena can only say that she “just wanted to do well.”

Asensio: Elena's grandmother replies wisely: *“Why do you think doing the same as all the others is the way to go?”* As a child, you don't necessarily want to shine; you don't want to stand out. Your parents might want you to, but you just want to be like every other kid. That scene tells us, on one hand, about the kind of girl Elena is, but also about her grandmother's wisdom.

That speaks from the scene in which Grandma makes Elena dance. Rather than trying to make her fit into a structure, she wants to bring out the strength that is inside the girl.

Asensio: As she grows older, looking back on her life, Grandma tells her not to waste time trying to fit in, but to



embrace her own path. Pulling that from Elena, she is the only one who sees the girl's full potential.

Although she only appears in a few scenes, Grandma leaves a strong impression.

Asensio: Gloria Muñoz is a great actress; in her two scenes, she just gave it her all. She helped so much in bringing the young protagonist, Alessandra González (*playing Elena*), physically close to her. Kids might not be so in-

clined to hug elderly strangers, but Gloria showed Alessandra that she was someone you could trust, hug, and feel safe with.

There's something in Elena's eyes, a combination of heartbreaking innocence and straightforward power, that is really exceptional.

Asensio: That is what made me fall in love with Alessandra the first time I saw her on tape. We asked all candidates to improvise around a few

questions and clues we gave them. She was the only one who would not answer right away; she took a minute to process the question, trying to understand exactly what we wanted from her, and then gave us an eloquent answer. Not to impress us, but just because she is like that. She has a great intuition. Let us hope she never takes acting lessons! Keep your intuition intact and remain curious about the world; that's the best acting class you can get.

As innocent as they are, there is a strong and explicit femininity in the two girls, and you're not afraid to show it.

Asensio: It was a battle! I wanted to show how innocent these girls are at this age, not even aware of their sexuality, but I had to make sure not to overexpose them. In a scene with Serezade, the Roma girl, dancing, with her skirt floating in the air, there is a moment when we catch a glimpse of her underwear. In the editing, the producers advised me to cut the scene earlier. Of course, their fear was valid, but somehow, it's exactly that freedom that children have and that I wanted to show.

Like in the remarkable scene in which both girls see their reflec-

tions in the mirror splinters on the floor.

Asensio: Call it femininity, call it sexuality, call it self-discovery... They are completely unaware of the underlying forces that are already emerging, which is beautiful.

A text that Elena reads aloud to her grandmother adds an extra layer of meaning.

Asensio: This poem by Spanish poet León Felipe questions all things we know, which are all invented by mankind. Stories were created and then written down. But basically, all the doctrines are only there to narrow our minds and our thinking. Felipe concludes I learned all of these stories, I fell asleep with them, but most of them sprouted from the fear of mankind.

The same can be said about religion.

Asensio: All life's bigger questions create anguish because we can't answer them. All we have is faith, which often emerges from fear; a fear of realising that this is all there is, and basically, you're alone in this world. Religion is there to guide you, and, perhaps, make you break with individualism and find some sort of comfort in belonging to a group, of which all members share the same beliefs.



How does that character of the priest fit in? Does he represent the traditional religious authority? Something tells me that he's not sure about his own beliefs.

Asensio: He is inspired by a priest from my childhood. I remember his voice sounded like he had just been smoking. Why would a man who is married to God dye his hair? Where does this vanity come from? He must have some secret life behind closed doors. I told the actor Enrique Villén: You love rock and roll; straight from the church, you go home, you take off your cassock, and you blast some rock and roll on your stereo, you dance,

you play your electric guitar, and nobody knows about it. That's your passion. Being a priest is your job, like a school teacher, and you want to make sure these kids pass the test. That's your goal.

Did you need to grow up in the Spanish tradition to tell this story?

Asensio: Elena's feelings are universal, but the specificities are Spanish, indeed. The 80s in Spain were a period of transition, like an awakening in society that wanted to break with the censorship of its recent dictatorial past. There was something in the air; you could feel this freedom with art-



ists and musicians, and with the people on the streets.

News reports about a kidnapping help us to situate the era of the 1980s correctly; at the schoolyard, kids are playing 'police versus terrorists'.

Asensio: The media coverage of a businessman being kidnapped by a terrorist group in my childhood affected the entire Spanish nation. We understood how the ransom was related to freedom and independence. I grew up next to a neighbourhood where many families came from the military, and there was a threat of bombs regularly. I vividly remember as a kid walking by a car, thinking, Oh my god, I hope it doesn't explode.

The moment Elena runs away from home, she gains a different view of the world. Her gaze on small things changes, like a bucket of water or the sand under her feet.

Asensio: The way we see and perceive Elena's world is exactly how she feels it. When she feels distant from her parents, the camera reflects that through their cut-off silhouettes, out of focus or distorted. When running away, she's discovering the world by herself. Feeling a spiritual connection with her grandma, she remembers

the poem, like a legacy that is being passed on to her. At that moment, we change the film's aspect ratio to make it feel like everything expands in cinema scope!

This seems to be the year of the goat... I've been asking directors remarkably often about goats. Now it's your turn. Goats seem to have problems with authority.

Asensio: While writing the script, I imagined all those things that goats would do. But our goat did none of them! They are rebellious, but that's what makes me sympathise with them. My star sign is Aries, the ram; we just go our own way, even if it's completely irrational. I deliberately used the word 'rebellious'; if I were to describe myself as 'stubborn', too many people would be taking credit. *"Ana finally admitted she's stubborn!"* I'm a very passionate person, also as a filmmaker, which comes with a certain intensity.

Why did you need a voiceover?

Asensio: It was at the very end of the editing process that I felt like there was something that I wanted to hit, and I didn't know how. There was an insecurity about my ability to get my personal, intimate story across. I tried an improvised voiceover at home, and



to this day, I'm not fully sure if that was the right choice. At that moment, it gave me some peace and security that I did everything within my power to reach deeper and make the film as personal as possible. That's why it's my own voice that you hear.

That's not so surprising, given your career as an actress.

Asensio: Acting was my first love, and I pursued it my whole life. Until I realised that this was no longer sufficient to express myself and feel fulfilled. I wrote and directed my first feature film eight years ago, and now I've

made the second one. As an actress, you depend on what comes your way; if you are not among the lucky ones who are offered truly exciting roles, you end up being frustrated. I love acting in projects that I feel like belonging to. If those projects come my way, I'll fully embrace them.

—
Gert Hermans

ECFA AWARDS 2026



If you want an overview of the best, and we mean the very best, films produced in Europe for young audiences over the past year, just take a look at the list of nominations for the ECFA Award. These films, selected by 35 ECFA juries at 26 participating festivals, were nominated in the categories Best Feature, Best Short, and Best Documentary, offering an excellent sample of European quality production.

The winners of the ECFA Awards 2026, the only European children's film awards voted on by professionals, will be announced during the Award Ceremony in Berlin on February 14, 2026.

NOMINATED FOR THE ECFA FEATURE FILM AWARD

LIVING LARGE

Kristina Dufkova; Slovakia / Czech Republic
Nominated at the Youth Film Festival Antwerp (B)

HONEY

Natasha Arthy; Denmark
Nominated at the BUFF Filmfestival Festival (I)

GREETINGS FROM MARS

Sarah Winkentette; Germany
Nominated at SIFFCY (IND)

TALES FROM THE MAGIC GARDEN

David Súpup, Patrik Pašš, Leon Vidmar & Jean-Claude Rozec; Czech Republic / Slovakia / Slovenia / France
Nominated at the Giffoni Int'l Film

I ACCIDENTALLY WROTE A BOOK

Nora Lakos; Hungary
Nominated at the Int'l Children's Film Festival Kristiansand (N), Kino Dzieci (PL), Lucas Int'l Youth Film Festival (D), Athens Int'l Children's Film Festival (GR)

TOMORROW, I'LL BE BRAVE

Bernd Sahling; Germany



LIVING LARGE



HONEY



TALES OF THE MAGIC GARDEN



Nominated at the Schlingel Int'l Film Festival (D)

GOAT GIRL

Ana Asensio; Spain
Nominated at Film'On (B)

MIRA

Marie Limkilde; Denmark
Nominated at Just Film (EE)

LAMPIE

Margien Rogaar; the Netherlands
Nominated at the Oulu Int'l Children's & Youth FF (FI)

SAMIA

Yasemin Samdereli; Germany / Bel-

gium / Sweden
Nominated at Castellinaria Festival (CH)

OLIVIA AND THE INVISIBLE EARTH-QUAKE

Irene Iborra Rizo; Spain / Chile / Belgium / France / Switzerland
Nominated at Alekino! (PL)

SPILT MILK

Brian Durnin; Ireland / UK
Nominated at Olympia Festival (GR)



SAMIA



MIRA



LAMPIE



SPILT MILK



NOMINATED FOR THE ECFA SHORT AWARD

SPARROWS

Rémi Durin; Belgium
Nominated at the Youth Film Festival Antwerp (B)

WE MADE A FILM

Tota Alwes; Portugal
Nominated at Play Festival (P), Mo & Friese (D)

THE NIGHT BOOTS

Pierre-Luc Granjon; France
Nominated at Ciné-Jeune de l'Aisne (F)

MUSHROOM'S LIFE

Evalds Laci; LV
Nominated at the Int'l Children's Film Festival Kristiansand (N)

GRAVITY

Robotina; Italy / Mexico
Nominated at Int'l Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen (D)

HANNAH & THE CROCODILE

Lore Mechelaere; Belgium
Nominated at Women's Film Festival (D)

IN BETWEEN

Nour El Achkar, Roxane David, Morgane Chauvet, Flora Rouvel, Lucie

Perales, Cindy Fanchonna & Sacha Moreau; France
Nominated at Cactus Film Festival (I)

WOLFIE

Phillipe Kastner; Czech Republic
Nominated at Bucharest Kids Film Festival (RO)

HAPPY SNAPS

Tyro Heath; UK
Nominated at Film'On (B)

BOBEL'S KITCHEN

Fiona Rolland; Belgium
Nominated at Athens Int'l Children's Film Festival (GR)

SUMMER OF DREAMS

Kim Faber; the Netherlands
Nominated at the Oulu Int'l Children's & Youth FF (FI)

DOWN IN THE DUMPS

Vera van Wolferen; the Netherlands
Nominated at Olympia Festival (GR)



BOBEL'S KITCHEN



HANNAH & THE CROCODILE



DOWN IN THE DUMPS

**NOMINATED FOR THE ECFA DOC
AWARD**

JUST JOOLS

Ezra Verbist; Belgium
Nominated at the Youth Film Festival
Antwerp (B)

THE INVISIBLE ONES

Martijn Blekendaal, the Netherlands
Nominated at LET'S DOC (PL)

CIRCUSBOY

Julia Lemke & Anna Koch; Germany
Nominated at the Zlin Film Festival
(CZ), DOXS RUHR (D)

GIRLS DON'T CRY

Sigrid Klausmann & Lina Luzyte, Ger-
many
Nominated at Film'On (B)

**GRANDPA HAS A BROKEN EYE AND
MUM IS AN ADVENTURE**

Marita Mayer; Norway
Nominated at doxs! (D)

CLEAR SKY

Marcin Kundera; Poland
Nominated at Olympia Festival (GR)



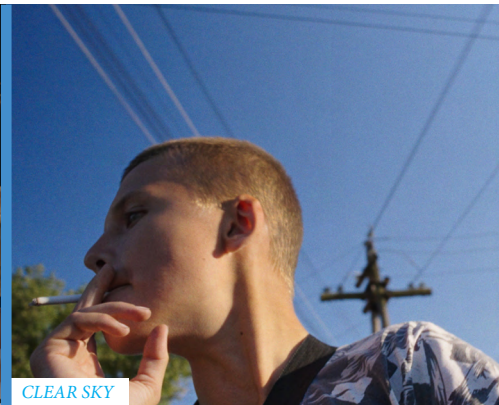
GIRLS DON'T CRY



JUST JOOLS



CIRCUSBOY



CLEAR SKY

Emma Tirand about the BENSHI streaming platform

“Our audience constantly renews itself”

The rapid rise of streaming platforms is having a huge impact on our sector. Not a single industry event goes by without specialist analysts comparing figures on the consequences for the production, distribution and consumption of (children's) films. But we prefer to get our information straight from the source, and ECFA is delighted to count Benshi, a specialised streaming platform for children, among our members. Emma Tirand talks about the successes and obstacles for a specialised channel with a robust quality catalogue, that is trying to hold its own in an extremely competitive environment.

Can you do an elevator pitch for Benshi?

Emma Tirand: Benshi is a streaming platform for children aged 2 to 11 years old, focusing on interesting arthouse films that challenge their viewpoints. We follow an editorial line with the help of our editorial committee, which decides on every film that is presented on our platform. That editorial line is crucial for what we do.

On the children's market today, do we need more content or better content?

Tirand: Children are exposed to screens everywhere, all the time. Even parents who closely monitor what their children watch can do little to rectify this. We offer a safe space where children can watch age-appropriate films. We're the only platform providing such specific age recommendations, which reassures parents. Compared to the never-ending catalogues on channels such as Netflix, Benshi offers relatively few titles. As a small platform, we don't believe in a constant stream of content; we believe in well-chosen films that spark something in your child, especially since children tend to watch their favourite content over and over again.

You talk from a parent's point of view. What role do they play in Benshi's policy?

Tirand: We don't believe in the cliché that what is made for children is by definition childish. We push for films that are interesting to watch as a



THE THREE ROBBERS

family. We believe that creators who work for children need to be extra selective, because this is the time when your audience grows up, discovers things, and develops. Those stories need to be even better than others. Of course, we all know that there are times when parents put their children in front of the television to have a moment to themselves. Both ways of using films are fine. Parents will make choices for their children in line with their own preferences. That's why we advertise to parents, not to the children. When we talk about Benshi, we talk about the parents.

accurate in your age recommendations?

Tirand: A three-year-old does not have the same interests as a seven-year-old, or a ten-year-old. They don't have the same knowledge or attention span. For younger audiences, we mainly offer (series of) short films; we rarely show feature films. Classics such as AZUR & ASMAR (Michel Ocelot) or THE THREE ROBBERS (Hajo Freitag) are suitable for those who want to enjoy feature films for the first time. Our age ratings take into account the themes, length, pace of films, etc.

Why is it important to be so super

This narrative differs from the usu-



NO DOGS OR ITALIANS ALLOWED

al commercial considerations of streaming platforms, but is entirely consistent with that of most festivals in our sector.

Tirand: Benshi's roots lie in cinemas, in the Studio des Ursulines, an arthouse cinema in Paris specialising in children's films. We maintain strong ties with French cinemas and festivals. The importance of discovering films in the cinema does not conflict with our idea that children can also watch them online. These two patterns can coexist perfectly.

How do you keep that bond with the cinemas alive?

Tirand: Benshi consists of two ele-

ments: a streaming platform and an online cinema guide. Our editorial manager and her committee watch every title that is released in French cinemas. If a film gets a Benshi recommendation label, we'll promote it on our website, we'll post a review, we'll have announcements in our newsletter, and we'll look for partnerships with distributors. Since COVID, SVOD has grown tremendously, and streaming has become a part of people's lives. But it doesn't exclude the success of cinemas.

What is your personal role in the organisation chart?

Tirand: I'm in charge of acquisitions; I

buy films for the platform. Benshi is an editorialised platform, which means that each month, the editorial manager and I work hand in hand to propose themes, to which I adjust my acquisition activities. For instance, last October, we had an interesting selection around exile, for which I bought films like NO DOGS OR ITALIANS ALLOWED (Alain Ughetto), DOUNIA AND THE PRINCESS OF ALEPPO (Marya Zarif), and several shorts. These themes keep coming back, as our audience constantly renews itself – that's one of the nice things about working for a platform for children. When you start watching Benshi at the age of three, two years later, your preferences will have completely changed, but other children will have come along to take your place.

How are things organised on the acquisition side?

Tirand: We mostly buy non-exclusive SVOD rights for French-speaking territories; Benshi has always been a French platform. But in October 2025, we launched a platform in Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg, with a new website and new films. We partnered with Cinekid in the Netherlands for the launch and with Film'On in Belgium for a Benshi Award. And from December 2024, we

have another platform in the UK. We will further strengthen our presence by offering Dutch and English dubs, and luckily, we offer many films without dialogue.

How would you position Benshi compared to other streaming platforms?

Tirand: We're not the main platform in a family. People come to us for specific, additional content that they're not necessarily familiar with. They might stay with us for a while, but I don't see ourselves as competitors with Disney or Netflix. We play in a different category.

Would that audience be comparable to the average festival audience?

Tirand: Not necessarily. What Benshi and festivals have in common is the audience's trust. Just as schools and families confidently go to a festival, hoping to be pleasantly surprised, parents trustfully come to us to discover something new. The intensity of this experience depends on how much parents are willing to invest in it. If you navigate our age ratings carefully, you can easily find films that you can watch with children of different ages, as a family experience.

Has Benshi already become a brand



THE LITTLE MOLE

among producers? As in, “I’ve made a typical Benshi film”?

Tirand: I know exactly what a Benshi film is. I’m not sure if producers want to brand their work as such, but they do know what we’re looking for. Unfortunately, we don’t financially involve ourselves in a project until it’s finished. We don’t do pre-sales... yet..

Do you have an idea about your audience profile?

Tirand: It’s very urban; mostly middle to upper-class families who take their children to cinemas anyway. We reach out to new potential audiences, including those who lack easy access to movie theaters, through social media and parent influencers that are

aligned with us, but it’s not easy.

What percentage of your content is produced in France?

Tirand: 80%, I would say. That’s a lot. We also have content from Spain, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, and a lot from Eastern Europe, where the stop-motion tradition is strong. Which speaks from patrimonial content, like THE LITTLE MOLE (Zdeněk Miler), that we are happy to include in our catalogue.

Your website shows a list of Benshi’s “heroes”! Who’s on your list?

Tirand: The little bear POMPON (Mathieu Gaillard), the cute bird DIMITRI (Agnès Lecreux & Fabien Drouet), and my all-time favourite short on Benshi

is ANATOLE’S LITTLE SAUCEPAN, a lovely stop-motion animation by Eric Montchaud.

Benshi even has a section for documentaries. If kids have the pre-conception that documentaries are boring, inaccessible films for adults, Benshi is there to prove the opposite with a very accessible catalogue.

Tirand: Good documentaries for young audiences are hard to find. There are lots of nature documentaries made for television, but we prioritise the cinematic aspect and link it to fascinating themes. Like in THE ANCIENT WOODS (Mindaugas Survila), a Lithuanian film without dialogue, it’s a fantastic experience to be immersed in a forest like that. It’s these kinds of unique adventures that Benshi promotes, because they foster a love for cinema at a young age.

Among all the other streaming platforms, you make a nice, civilised impression: No advertisements, but affordable prices...

Tirand: We are no sharks! In this highly competitive market, we have around 25,000 subscribers in France, and we continue to grow, partly with the support of CNC (French National Film Centre) as well as Creative Europe



Emma Tirand

MEDIA for our European expansion. It is not easy to carve out a place for ourselves in the market, but we seize every opportunity to tap into new markets, and we remain true to who we are.

Is being a jury member at a festival a suitable way for you to prospect for new content?

Tirand: Film’On was my first time as a member of an ECFA Jury. It was great to discuss with other jury members, and I’m happy with the choice we ultimately made for GOAT GIRL by Ana Asensio

—
Gert Hermans

Dorien Schetz on OLIVIA AND THE INVISIBLE EARTHQUAKE

"I usually find chaotic people very enjoyable"

The life of 12-year-old Olivia is turned upside down overnight, now that she must learn to look after her younger brother. Fortunately, she gets help from her cheerful neighbours. Together, they turn every task into a game and every day into an unforgettable moment.

OLIVIA AND THE INVISIBLE EARTHQUAKE focuses on a fascinating group of children in the suburbs of Barcelona. The monsters they battle are the everyday problems of people struggling to keep their heads above water in uncertain times. If the film has a fairy-tale quality, it is to be found in friendship and solidarity among families and 'kids from the block'. This Spanish co-production, which received a nomination for the ECFA Awards at the AleKino! festival, is the successful result of a quest to strike a balance between stylish design and a limited budget. That's what Assistant Director Dorien Schetz tells us.

You are the one to define the scope of our conversation. As Assistant

Director, I don't know exactly what your responsibilities are.

Dorien Schetz: The story of the film, the design, and the sets are already fixed when I become involved in a project. My job is to supervise the organisation, and I prefer to do that for stop-motion films. That's what I've been doing throughout my entire professional career, first at the Beast Animation stop-motion studio, and then on the sets of SAUVAGES (Claude Barras) and OLIVIA. I don't choose projects based on content, but on the technique used.

How much stop-motion is OLIVIA AND THE INVISIBLE EARTHQUAKE?

Schetz: 100% stop-motion!

I don't think so! I saw a bit of shadow play, I saw sand animation...

Schetz: It's not 100% puppet animation, but stop-motion is about bringing dead objects to life. Like sand! Mama Fatou's roots are beautifully illustrated in a piece of sand animation with a leopard and an African village. We had César Díaz on our team,



one of my favourite animators and an absolute master of sand animation. It would be a shame not to use that skill in the film. That shadow play was filmed on set with transparent paper and then animated in stop-motion. The puppets and sets are real... You find stop-motion in many different forms.

Without too many technical gadgets.

Schetz: This is a European low-budget film, but within our limited budget, the whole team has created something beautiful, purely artisanal, and

with minimal post-production. The scene in which Olivia ends up in a dream world was created entirely by hand: the lighting was prepared, the effects were set up by the lighting team, and the animation was done layer by layer. In Barcelona, there is a brand of lightly sparkling water that is sold in bottles with a special relief pattern. The camera team used this to create a lighting effect. You can also do this with a lens that costs €10,000, but we did it with a bottle. Or we animated a candle flame with papier-mâché on a flat plate, manually, frame by frame.

There is a striking shot in which we look through the camera of a mobile phone, and the hands are enlarged to fill the entire screen. They are so delicately made, with dirty edges under the nails.

Schetz: Hands are madness! I've never seen such perfect miniature hands, so delicate. They broke easily, so people on the team were constantly busy making hands.

The film is set in Barcelona. How am I supposed to know? The location is never mentioned.

Schetz: It can't be anywhere else but Barcelona. You can tell from every detail: the pavements, the bollards in the street, the lampposts, the architecture of the houses. The set design team did a fantastic job. They even smuggled those flowered Flor de Barcelona tiles into the film.

From now on, my favourite place in Barcelona is Calle Futur 33, the street corner that is often shown in the film. Sometimes with people around, sometimes deserted...

Schetz: That's a brilliant example of the work of our amazing team. Despite the limited budget, they got the most out of it. The result is stunning. Look at all those details: posters on



the walls, notes with telephone numbers, a message about a runaway cat, the classic ACAB graffiti... Everything is there! The sets were made in Valencia. When they were delivered to Barcelona, we stood there staring with our mouths open. It was mind-blowing! The largest set was the street map, which was about 60 square metres. And that was just one of twelve! You can keep an interior set small, but as soon as you go outside, the size grows exponentially.

Depending on the time of day, the horizon changes colour beautifully, with shades of orange and purple.

Schetz: Credit for this goes to the camera and lighting team, who chose

the right lighting mood for each sequence, as directed by DoP Isabel de la Torre. The director determines what time of day the scene takes place and what the weather conditions are like. Then the team gets to work creating the right atmosphere, which they maintain throughout the entire sequence, so that the sun is in the same place and the shadows fall correctly.

You've already passed on my compliments to someone else three times. Is there anything I can say that might be a compliment to you?

Schetz: That the film was finished on time. I moved to Barcelona in January, the shoot was due to start in April,

and we had to be ready by the end of December. I knew in advance: we have 8 months of animation in 12 to 14 studios, 8 animators, 12 Olivia dolls, 10 Tims, 5 Lamines, 3 Vanessas, 2 Kikis, 5 mothers, and one Superspunk. We have to shoot so many seconds in so many sets... You have to get all the teams – set, puppets, camera, animation, direction, production, rigging, and post-production – to work together without everything exploding. And if something goes wrong, e.g. a puppet breaks, you have to anticipate very quickly. I have to make the perfect puzzle out of all those elements within a certain time limit. I succeeded in doing that, and I'm quite proud of it.

How does the assistant director relate to the director in the organisational chart?

Schetz: My main task is to take care of all the practical stuff, so that the director only has to think about the creative aspect. Which animator will make which shot with which puppet? It's all planned out! That allows the director to concentrate fully on the emotions or the action in that shot. I do this job because I am frighteningly well organised. And because I love animated films, and many people in that sector are less well-organised.



So I can help them. I don't mind being surrounded by a bunch of chaotic people. I usually find chaotic people very enjoyable, and they are grateful for someone like me. We complement each other.

You made an interesting choice for the dolls' basic hair.

Schetz: It's usually wool, stiffened with iron wire, so that some hairs are still movable. The choice of material is determined by the available time and budget, in consultation with the director and the puppet designer. If the choice of material makes the animators' work too difficult, it puts the brake on the number of seconds you can deliver per day.

If I were to ask you a similar question about the eyes, I would probably get the same answer.

Schetz: It is always the result of artistic and budgetary choices. You choose expressive eyes, but you also have to be able to work with them easily. The most difficult thing about Olivia was her glasses. They make her eyes difficult for the animators to handle, especially because we wanted to adapt the eyelids in every position. You see those animators fiddling with eyelids behind those glasses with a small stick, and then I'm glad I'm not an animator. Last year, on the set of SAUVAGES, all the characters had super-large eyes. That's not only an artistic choice, but also a practical one,

because it allows you to work faster.

The film features a few remarkable fantasy scenes, including a particularly striking one in which blue whales appear. Do these fit into the overall picture seamlessly, or do you need to develop a separate design for them?

Schetz: A shot in which they play Eschimo is much more complex than two characters simply talking, because you are working in different layers: the northern lights are one layer, the iceberg, the wavy water, the whale, the dolls... We estimate about four seconds of animation per day, but here you have to calculate four seconds for each of the five layers, so you're working five times as long. What's more, the whale was built on a small scale so that it wouldn't be too unwieldy. It's animated on green key so that it can be scaled afterwards.

The co-production line-up looks quite interesting, with Chile joining the usual suspects.

Schetz: That's not so strange. No European country can produce a feature-length animated film on its own. Such a film is, by definition, an international co-production. Spain and Chile couldn't secure the financing. So France, Belgium and, in the end, Swit-



zerland joined in.

And completed the film in eight months! Isn't that incredibly fast?

Schetz: We did SAUVAGES in six months! That's fast. But OLIVIA did stay within the time frame, at an average of 3.2 seconds per animator per day.

Because you strictly ensured that everyone met their quota!

Schetz: Indeed, strictly but fairly.

—
Gert Hermans

WHY WE CARE

Children's and youth film thrives on openness, curiosity, and a diversity of perspectives. To protect and strengthen these qualities, ECFA has developed a Code of Conduct, just in time for the upcoming AGM. The Code is part of a broader awareness concept that ECFA is working on, bringing together respectful collaboration, discrimination awareness, sustainability, and fair working conditions.

At its core, the Code of Conduct provides a shared framework for interaction within ECFA contexts – at festivals, meetings, projects, and collaborations. It is based on a clear-eyed understanding of reality: no professional or cultural space is automatically free of discrimination or power imbalances. Where people with different backgrounds, experiences, and positions come together, tensions, misunderstandings, and boundary crossings can occur.

Ongoing learning process

The Code, therefore, clearly states that ableism, antisemitism, classism, racism, sexism, queophobia, and all

other forms of discrimination have no place within ECFA. We are aware of the impossibility of fully naming all forms or experiences of discrimination, yet we also deeply respect the importance of making these experiences visible and formally documented. Therefore, we emphasise that we oppose all forms of group-based hostility.

At the same time, we understand awareness works as an ongoing learning process rather than a claim to perfection. Social complexity, contradictions, and mistakes are part of our shared work. What matters is how transparently, responsibly, and fairly we deal with them, and whether we are willing to reflect on our own privileges and structural conditions.

Resources and power relations

Our approach also explicitly includes sustainability and fair pay. Creating respectful spaces is inseparable from questions of resources and power relations: how we work, under which conditions, and at whose expense. ECFA understands ecological responsibility and fair remuneration as es-

sential elements of ethical practice in children's film culture, closely linked to inclusion, access, and long-term solidarity within the field.

Complaint management

An important practical element of the Code of Conduct is the complaint management system that follows from it. ECFA is establishing clear and trustworthy contact points for concerns and complaints. Within the Board, **Gudrun Sommer** / sommer@doxs-ruhr.de, and **Remke Oosterhuis** / remke@taartrovers.nl will act as designated complaint managers. In addition, ECFA invites two members to step forward as trusted persons within the membership. Previous experience is very welcome, but not a requirement – openness, care, and the ability to listen are key.

The Code of Conduct is conceived as a living document to be reviewed and further developed over time. Like a shared foundation, it cannot remove all risks or conflicts, but it helps ensure that everyone can move within ECFA spaces with greater clarity,

responsibility, and mutual respect. With this understanding, ECFA looks forward to presenting the Code at the AGM and to continuing this collective learning process together with its members.

– Gudrun Sommer

CALL FOR BEST CARING PRACTICES

ECFA aims to give greater visibility to topics around Cinema of Care.. As film institutions working with young audiences, ECFA members take on a responsibility in society that goes beyond programming and film education. This understanding resonates with the Cinema of Care movement as described by Brigitta Kuster in *We Fight Because We Care: "a cinema that sees to things and looks after them (...). Cinema of Care should intervene in the relationship between the spectator and the given-to-be-seen."* By creating spaces for dialogue, shared reflection and concrete practice, ECFA seeks to support its members in shaping film culture as a caring, responsible and

socially engaged field.

ECFA invites its members to share why they consider care, sustainability, and fair pay essential to their work, and how these values are put into practice in their organisations. Let's inspire each other.

Is your organisation involved in initiatives focused on care or solicitude? Are you working towards more sustainable structures or fairer working conditions? Are you undertaking initiatives to provide opportunities to groups or individuals who are underrepresented? If so, we would like to give you a platform in a new section of the ECFA Journal so that you can inspire others.

Please, contact ECFA at journal@ecfaweb.org under the heading 'Cinema of Care'.

HOW CAN FILM CRITICISM GROW UP WITH ITS AUDIENCE?

During the Berlinale, ECFA will co-host a panel (with Berlin Critics' Week, FIPRESCI, and the German Film Critics Association) that addresses a persistent blind spot in film criticism: the way films for young audiences too often get too little attention. International critics and curators will reflect on where and for whom film criticism should be written today — parents, adults, or young audiences. A conversation on visibility, responsibility, and the future of film criticism.

Speakers:

Marta Bałaga (moderator, writing for

Variety and Cineuropa)

Carmen Gray (journalist and film programmer)

Tobias Krell (TV personality, known as "Checker Tobi")

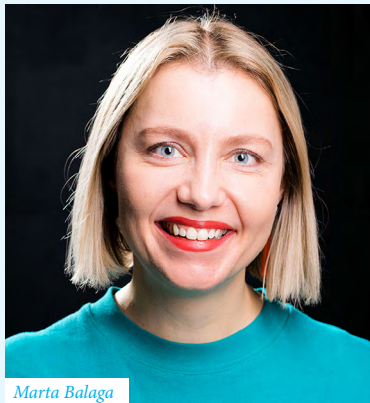
Axel Timo Purr (editor Artechock and Literatur Review)

Saturday, February 14, 13:45 – 15:15

Location: Landesvertretung Thüringen in Berlin, Anton-Wilhelm-Amo-Straße 64, Berlin



Axel Timo Purr



Marta Bałaga



Carmen Gray



Tobias Krell

Atlas of the Universe

Feature Film, Romania, Bulgaria, 2026

Directed by Paul Negoescu

Prod.: deFilm, Screening Emotions,

Avanpost Media

World Sales: Pluto Film

Phone: ++49-30-98-43-75-87

info@plutofilm.de

www.plutofilm.de



Beef

Feature Film, Spain, Mexico, 2025

Directed by Ingrid Santos

Prod.: Sábado Películas, Playtime

Movies, Filmin,...

World Sales: Film Factory

Phone: ++34-933-68-46-08

info@filmfactory.es

www.filmfactoryentertainment.com

Billy the Cowboy Hamster

Animation, France, 2025

Directed by Antoine Rota & Cat Murrell

Prod.: Dandeloo, France TV

World Sales: Dandeloo

Phone: ++33- 972-64-46-01

sales@dandeloo.com

www.dandeloo.com



The Boy at the Edge of the World

Animation, Poland, Turkey, Spain, 2025

Directed by Grzegorz Wąclawek & Marta Szymańska

Prod.: Animoon, Telewizja Polska, 7Sky Animation...

World Sales: Sola Media

Phone: ++49-711-96-89-44-40

post@sola-media.com

www.sola-media.com

Brother

Feature Film, Poland, 2025

directed by Maciej Sobieszkański

Prod. & World Sales: Apple Film

Phone: ++48-503-47-72-21

applefilm@applefilm.pl

www.applefilm.pl

The Bugaboo

Feature Film, Czech & Slovak Republic, 2025

Directed by Kateřina Karhánková & Tomáš Pavlíček

Prod.: MasterFilm, Punkchart Films

World Sales: MasterFilm

Phone: ++420-732-67-00-27

jakub@masterfilm.cz

www.masterfilm.cz/en

The Dreamers

Feature Film, France, 2025

Directed by Isabelle Carré

Prod.: Pan-Européenne, France 2

World Sales: Playtime

Phone: ++33-1-53-10-33-99

info@playtime.group

www.playtime.group



Everyone's Sorry Nowadays

Feature Film, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, 2026

Directed by Frederike Migom

Prod.: De Mensen, Juliet at Pupkin, Ketnet,...

World Sales: LevelK

Phone: ++45-48-44-30-72

niklas@levelk.dk

www.levelk.dk

The Last Whale Singer

Animation, Germany, Czech Republic, Canada, 2025

Directed by Reza Memari

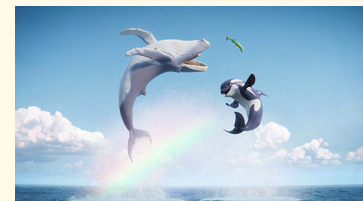
Prod.: Telescope Animation, L'Atelier Animation, PFX

World Sales: Global Screen

Phone: ++49-89-24-41-29-55-00

info@globalscreen.de

www.globalscreen.de



Mira

Feature Film, Denmark, 2025

Directed by Maria Limkilde

Prod.: Toolbox Film

World Sales: TrustNordisk

Phone: ++45-29-74-62-06

info@trustnordisk.com

www.trustnordisk.com

Mumbo Jumbo

Animation, Denmark, 2026

Directed by Karsten Kiilerich & Stine Marie Buhl

Prod.: A Film

World Sales: LevelK

Phone: ++45-48-44-30-72

niklas@levelk.dk
www.levelk.dk

The Pupil

Feature Film, the Netherlands, Belgium, 2025

Directed by Karin Junger
 Production: The Film Kitchen, Krater Films, Polar Bear...
 World Sales: Pluto Film
 Phone: ++49-30-98-43-75-87
info@plutofilm.de
www.plutofilm.de

Skiff

Feature Film, Belgium, the Netherlands, 2025

Directed by Cecilia Verheyden
 Prod.: Mirage Films, Lemming Film, Les Films du Fleuve,...
 World Sales: Outplay Films
 Phone: ++33-4-57-03-17-45
assistant@outplayfilms.com
www.outplayfilms.com



Sunny Dancer

Feature Film, UK, 2026

Directed by George Jaques
 Prod.: Athenaeum, Embankment, Night Train Media
 World Sales: Embankment Films
 Phone: ++44-20-71-83-47-39
info@embankmentfilms.com
www.embankmentfilms.com



Sunu Gaal, our Cayuco

Documentary, Spain, 2025

Directed by Josep T. Paris
 Prod.: Karavan Films
 World Sales: Feel Sales
 Phone: ++34-91-590-39-20
info@feelsales.com
www.feelsales.com/en

Terra Vil

Feature Film, Italy, Portugal, 2025

Directed by Luis Campos
 Prod.: Matiné, dispàrte, BRO Cinema,...
 World Sales: Matiné
info@matine.pt
www.matine.pt

The Lights, They Fall

Feature Film, Germany, 2026

Directed by Sasa Vajda
 Production: Vajda Film, Schuldenberg Films, ZDF,...
 World Sales: Vajda Film
contact@vajda-vajda.com
www.vajda-vajda.com

They Call Me Danka

Feature Film, Lithuania, 2025

Directed by Dovile Gasiunaite
 Prod. & World Sales: Filmai LT
 Phone: ++370-65-40-74-77
info@filmailt.eu
www.filmailt.eu

The Treasure of Barracuda

Animation, Spain, 2025

Directed by Adria Garcia
 Prod.: Inicia Films, Hampa Studio
 World Sales: Filmmax Int'l
 Phone: ++34-933-36-85-55
filmmaxint@filmmax.com
www.filmmaxinternationalsales.com



Vinski and the Viking Treasure

Feature Film, Finland, 2026

Directed by Juha Wuolijoki
 Prod.: Snapper Films
 World Sales: Attraction Distribution
 Phone: ++1-514-360-02-52
info@attractiondistribution.ca
www.attractiondistribution.ca



Wheelie

Feature Film, The Netherlands, 2025

Directed by Isis Mihrimah Cabolet
 Prod.: The Rogues, GROM Prod., BN-NVARA
 World Sales: The Rogues
info@therogues.nl
www.therogues.nl/en

More information on all these films you will find on our website:
www.ecfaweb.org/european-childrens-film-network/feature-films

Virginia Nardelli & Stefano La Rosa about THE CASTLE

“When cinema creates something that wasn’t there before”

In the middle of Palermo, Sicily, stands an old, abandoned kindergarten. People say the place is haunted and should be avoided. But three children - Angelo, Mary, and Rosy - find a secret hideout there, a safe haven where, out of sight of the world, they share their imagination and fears. Until their refuge threatens to be demolished. Three directors (Virginia Nardelli, Stefano La Rosa & Danny Bioncardi) follow in their footsteps - we spoke with two of them.

The documentary was filmed over a long period of time, but feels like a snapshot, a crucial moment in a young life, with a foreshadowing of the life that awaits them, and which they are already reflecting on. With compassionate understanding, the filmmakers observe this moment between hope and sorrow.

For a children’s audience, THE CASTLE might be a film about building up something, while for me, it was more about losing something.

Stefano La Rosa: As an adult, you

might see something you already lived through but lost, and now you remember it. That evokes a certain melancholy.

Virginia Nardelli: When the kindergarten was destroyed, it felt like we lost something so beautiful. But it’s also a positive thing: a school will now be reopened. By doing a good thing for the community, a sweet dream for the children was shattered.

Where exactly is this story situated?

Nardelli: In Palermo, in the heart of the city, but the neighbourhood feels suburban, because the community completely ignores it. There are no shops, no bars; no public transport goes there. The only people on the streets are those living there. If you accidentally ended up there, you would be approached on the street: *“Sir, I think you’ve taken a wrong turn. Were you looking for somewhere else?”*

La Rosa: There is only one road leading there, which winds around the kindergarten and the square. On that road, kids are riding their quad bikes and scooters all day long; that’s how



they spend most of their time.

Groups of children hang around. In one scene, they are giving Angelo a rough time. That felt unpleasant, or was it just a harmless game?

Nardelli: That was an observation of how brutal things get on the streets. We felt uncomfortable filming it, so we asked Angelo and his parents whether or not to include that scene in the film. For him, it felt normal.

That explains why he says, “I love this neighbourhood, but not the people.”

Nardelli: If you’re not a full-blooded macho man, then you’re an outcast there.

La Rosa: Angelo simply isn’t like that; he has a gentle way of connecting with people, very different from the other kids. When we met him at the age of nine, he was not yet fully aware of that. But over the three years we’ve spent there, everything changed, including his perception of himself and of the neighbourhood. At a certain point, hanging out with two girls became problematic. Gender models are still approached in a traditional way there.



The girls tend to be dominant, while Angelo is more thoughtful.

Nardelli: Mary is rather bossy, Rosy is wild, and Angelo is more reflective. This created an interesting dynamic. But as soon as another kid entered the group, that balance fell apart.

La Rosa: Initially, it didn't matter much that he hung out with girls; he was still a child. Then, little by little, it became trickier until, at one point, we were afraid to jeopardise his social life in the neighbourhood! But he said, "No, I want to do this!" The obstacles were a mixture of social codes and jealousy. Other kids also wanted to be part of the film project, but as soon as they joined, they messed up everything. We constantly had to take those social dynamics into account.

How much did you guide those children? Why did they do all the things they did?

Nardelli: We were there for 70 days to film, but we spent at least twice as much time there, doing other things. We set up a framework for them to improvise. Sometimes it worked, most of the time it didn't. We had to wait for all the variables to fall into place, creating the perfect conditions for a cinematic moment. That happened rather organically than scripted.



La Rosa: We wanted to document something beyond their daily lives, and building up this new space with them in the kindergarten was a perfect occasion. They brought us there, and Rosy said, *"What a mess; let's clean it all up."* We thought: perfect!

Doing most of the 'construction work', she isn't afraid of getting her hands dirty!

Nardelli: Rosy is wild. She got herself quite a reputation for being a free spirit. For the film, she felt free to take it all out, without being judged by others.

La Rosa: This was her ultimate chance to prove herself as someone who could act responsibly and take care of things.

Nardilli: Her parents and teachers were surprised. *"We've never seen her like this. This is a side she never shows."* She was the most attached to the place. While workers had already begun demolishing the building, she kept tidying and cleaning. For me, that was one of the most emotional moments in our project.

Being proud of their work, they have a strong sense of ownership. This was really their place.

La Rosa: In this intense neighbourhood, it's difficult to find private space, but they created one for themselves. When they wrote their names on the wall, we were like... Yes! That makes it clear what this place really means to them.

Although their conversations sound surprisingly poetic and philosophical, we hear their daily concerns shining through. Did you push them to have such talks?

Nardelli: They can't be pushed!

La Rosa: The scene in which they talk about their fathers in jail started as a simple game, but then the tone of the conversation changed unexpectedly. Such stories are simply a part of their lives. Each family there has at least one family member in jail.

They also say that growing up scares them.

Nardelli: Growing up means following in their parents' footsteps. Mary's parents were only 14 when her mum gave birth to her - in one year, she will be the same age as her parents when they got her. Starting your own family is the only way to escape from the family nest. In that sense, every kid there is afraid to grow up. Mary says: When we will be married, being together like friends won't be possible anymore.

La Rosa: As a grown-up, boundaries are stricter. You can't hang around with male friends any longer. THE CASTLE tells about growing up in a context where social codes are strong, and your range of options is





narrow; you don't have many. That's a sad aspect of their lives. There is a political side to the story. Such neighbourhoods are often talked about in terms of clichés that we tried to deconstruct. We approached these themes without projecting preconceived ideas. We let those kids take us somewhere, in their own way.

The moment I learned the most about Angelo was in the song he sings, about “how nothing will change and we can stay here forever”.

La Rosa: That song is sung in a strong Neapolitan dialect. This ‘Neomelodica Napoletana’ music is very popular in that neighbourhood, but we couldn't understand the lyrics. We still don't

know exactly what the song is about, but the only words we could get - ‘*Nothing will happen*’ - did fit perfectly with that moment in the film.

Although you came as outsiders, they seemed to trust you completely.

La Rosa: We have earned that trust over time. Without patience, we would never have achieved this level of intimacy. We have constructed this story together with them over four years. For us, this was a lesson in finding different narratives, simply by letting people talk freely. We only created a framework for them.

Nardelli: We discovered our film while making it.

The demolition of the kindergarten is inevitable. Did you know all along that this was about to happen?

Nardelli: We knew there was a plan, but in Sicily, plans can stay on hold for years. But then suddenly it happened, and we were not ready for it.

La Rosa: We were still about 10% short of the planned recordings, so we had to find creative solutions. But we knew from the beginning that the renovation works could be a nice ending point.

But it's not the end! Why does the film end the way it ends?

Nardelli: I love it when cinema creates something that wasn't there before. When the realistic part of our story ends with the destruction of “our castle”, we created another magical space elsewhere, where we can return at any time in our imagination.

Have the kids seen the film?

La Rosa: We showed a preliminary result to the children and their parents to obtain their approval. But the Italian premiere at the Biografilm Festival in Bologna was the first time they had travelled by plane, stayed in a hotel... It was a very complete experience.

Nardelli: That was stressful for us. I remember myself shouting at 4



o'clock: “*Girls, please, go to sleep!*” But they had great fun!

We didn't talk much about cinematography. Maybe because it all felt so natural. Was there a big cinematographic plan behind it?

Nardelli: A lot of scenes took an amazing start, but then faded out, because children easily get bored. In the editing, we synthesised them a bit.

La Rosa: The filming happened rather spontaneously, without thinking about the decoupage. We ended up with loads of footage and four months to edit it.

—
Gert Hermans

GRANDPA HAS A BROKEN EYE AND MOM IS AN ADVENTURE

In Marita Mayer's animated documentary **GRANDPA HAS A BROKEN EYE AND MOM IS AN ADVENTURE**, four young people share their experiences of living with a family member affected by aphasia, a language disorder that can impair the ability to speak, understand, read, or write, often caused by brain injury or stroke. Through their voices, the film takes us into an intimate universe where moments of confusion, vulnerability, care, and affection intertwine. Every day communication becomes a challenge, yet these children develop their own ways of understanding and navigating a reality shaped by illness.

The animation, based on drawings created by the children, transforms their personal impressions into beautifully animated, metaphorical images. During the Q&A at the *doxs!* festival, Marita Mayer explained how this imagery allowed the children to shape how their experiences were visually told. The fact that her own children were also involved in this project makes the experience all the more personal. This combination of documentary storytelling and anima-

tion captures the voices and emotions of young protagonists with great respect.

The distinctive aesthetic style, enriched by the children's artwork and accompanied by a carefully chosen soundtrack, creates a powerful emotional impact, and was recognised by the ECFA Jury at the *doxs!* festival in November 2025. Selected from 12 competitive titles, **GRANDPA...** stood out for its playful yet sensitive approach to a serious topic. The ECFA Jury: *"The directors succeeded in translating children's perspectives into beautifully animated, metaphorical images that provide easy access to complex realities."*

GRANDPA HAS A BROKEN EYE AND MOM IS AN ADVENTURE exemplifies how animated documentary cinema can open new emotional and creative spaces for young audiences. By centering children's voices and building its imagery directly from their drawings, Marita Mayer creates a film that encourages empathy and reflection on illness, communication, and family relationships.



In doing so, the film not only enriches the landscape of children's documentary filmmaking but also demonstrates the power of animation as a tool to make invisible realities visible — gently, respectfully, and with great emotional depth.

—
Luca Stradmann

GRANDPA HAS A BROKEN EYE AND MOM IS AN ADVENTURE
Director: Marita Mayer
Norway, 2025 | 8'
Production: Rainy Day Productions

The Doxspot column is published with the help of the *doxs!* festival for children & youth documentaries in Duisburg. www.do-xs.de.

doxs! DOKUMENTARFILME
FÜR KINDER
UND JUGENDLICHE

HORROR FILM ELEMENTS IN CHILDREN'S FILM - Panel Discussion

"We have a mystery to solve, so Scooby-Doo, be ready for your act; don't hold back!" The idea to link the popular but controversial horror genre to children's films sounds progressive, almost provocative. But it isn't: the horror canon is clearly present in films for young people, either explicitly or implicitly, and according to Finnish researcher Marjo Kovanen, we shouldn't be sorry about that. She has completed her PhD on the presence of horror elements in children's films, and while educators fixate on dangers, she sees many positive aspects to this fascinating combination.

One of the strengths of the Industry@Tallinn & Baltic Event, organised during the JUST Film festival, is that it smoothly bridges (or ignores) the gap with children's films for every industry representative present. That is why a panel discussion on children's films and horror is a perfect fit for their programme, especially if it leads to a captivating panel conversation.

On stage were two experts, approaching the topic from a different perspective. On one side was Oskar Lehema,



BRAVE

an Estonian filmmaker who not only made straightforward horror films (such as BAD HAIR) but also found himself smuggling elements from the horror repertoire into seemingly innocent shorts for children (THE MYSTERY OF MISSING SOCKS). On the other side was Marjo Kovanen, Head of Promotion for the Finnish Arts and Culture Agency (formerly known as the National Audiovisual Institute), and a member of the ECFA Board. In her recently completed PhD, Marjo brought an interesting perspective to the table: how horror elements in children's films are not just about scares

and shivers, but about crafting stories that resonate deeply with young audiences.

Telling scary stories

Fear and fascination often go hand in hand. Kovanen: "Kids were already fascinated by Halloween, a celebration of the macabre with strong traits of horror culture, long before it was embraced by the commercial industries. Anyone who has ever done a filmmaking workshop with children knows how captivated they are with horror movies. And they love tell-

ing each other scary stories." It is no coincidence that this research was initiated in a Nordic country like Finland, where (like in Estonia) there is a deep-rooted connection with ancient nature traditions, and where the boundaries of the conventional in literature, art, and films for children are often stretched.

According to Kovanen, fear can fulfil several functions in children's lives, making horror a meaningful and enriching part of children's culture.

- Learning to process fear and anxiety is an emotional exercise that stimulates growth and sparks imagination.
- A playful reversal of norms and rules characterises festivities such as Halloween and Carnival. This transcultural play is often influenced by film and media content.
- Horror can support the building and strengthening of a group identity through shared experiences, shared narratives, and a shared sense of belonging.
- Horror aesthetics, strong and recognisable, can provide pure aesthetic pleasure.

- The horror genre can serve as a perfect vehicle for testing boundaries and exploring rules.
- The counterculture of horror, often combined with comedy, provides entertainment and pure fun.

Uneasy relationship

It's often adults who have an uneasy relationship with the genre and reject it frenetically. Kovanen: "In my work with teachers, I often noticed how many educators find horror in children's culture to be a difficult subject, and its significance is often denied. It is quite common for adults to project their own fears onto children, believing that exposure to strong emotional expressions might be harmful. Of course, all children are different; we're not talking about a monolithic audience. Like adults, not all children enjoy horror content. And those who do enjoy it may engage with the genre in different ways than adults do.

Through her PhD thesis, Kovanen outlines a film educational approach that introduces horror elements in pedagogical settings. "One of my key findings was that Finnish children's films incorporate horror elements through rich intertextuality, which promotes active spectatorship. This is a crucial

pedagogical practice." For example, the Finnish film *IRIS*, by Ulrika Bengts (2011), combines references to horror films in its storytelling with links to the classic Nordic film heritage (like Ingmar Bergman), visual arts and art history, thus building an intertextual network in which all viewers can find something for their taste. Children's horror can lay the platform for dialogue between generations, and between learners and teachers.

Under the bed

Director Oskar Lehemaa loves horror! And he has had the rare pleasure to work on films in both genres – horror and children's films – as a director. "But I wasn't aware that I had incorporated elements of one genre into the other. I guess I just followed my natural approach." This becomes clear in *THE MYSTERY OF MISSING SOCKS*, based on a children's story by the Estonian author Andrus Kivirähk. "The main character, a little girl, crawls under the bed in search of missing socks. There, she discovers that the socks are actually alive. I used Kivirähk's story as a jumping-off point, but I opened up that imaginary world and created some extra adventure. The tools that I used all sprouted, subconsciously, from the horror genre: building up



Marjo Kovanen & Oskar Lehemaa

tension, creating a mysterious atmosphere through lighting and music, and introducing an antagonistic force. But it was important to me to end the story with a catharsis. I want to offer the kids the final victory over the antagonising force. If Pille bravely ventures into a scary place, I want her to have the agency to make this dark place her own, and chase the scariness away."

What follows is an edited on-stage-conversation between Oskar Lehemaa and Marjo Kovanen.

Marjo Kovanen: I'm positively obsessed with horror movies and with children's media. Numerous cultural meanings are embedded in horror, far more than in any other genre. This rich intertextuality, which not only refers to dark emotions but also encompasses all kinds of cultural expressions, remains fascinating to me.

Lehemaa: So often we hear remarks about how children's media is too scary or too extreme.

Kovanen: I hear that all the time! Especially among educators, I often encountered this strong attitude against contemporary media – it's always contemporary media, no matter

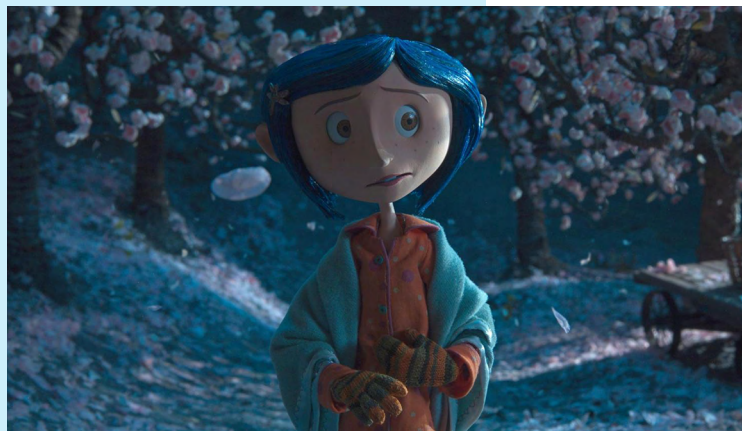
what year we are in - that are getting blamed for being too dark. My easy answer would be that “kids love it”. In my teacher training, I explain how media consumption can actually become a truly active experience. If supported with media literacy tools, this should lead to better agency for children and enhance their imagination, their literacy skills, etc. If an adult notices a child getting frightened, the first reaction is often to ban that content: “This is harmful; you shouldn’t watch it.” While, actually, this could be the perfect opportunity for a dialogue about what exactly scares you. Not only children need to learn emotional skills, but adults too.

Lehemaa: I’m not saying that watching scary movies should be forced upon all children. But the tendency is more to ban it outright, which is a shame. Then you’re not doing the work, especially now that children encounter horror elements more often through digital media.

Lehemaa: What stood out to you when analysing horror elements in Anglo-American and Finnish films?

Kovanen: Initially, in Finnish children’s cinema in the 21st century, horror elements mainly came up in arthouse-related titles, while in commercial cinema, there was pressure to keep things

bright and positive; there was no space for a darker aesthetic. But not anymore! Nowadays, you’ll find such references everywhere in mainstream children’s cinema, often going hand in hand with fantasy elements, with *CORALINE* and *BRAVE* as striking examples.



CORALINE

Age ratings

Lehemaa: When talking about horror movies for kids, the topic of age ratings is unavoidable. In Estonia, we do not have a centralised film ratings board. Filmmakers decide on the age restriction themselves, in consulta-

tion with their distributor. This is the *Wild West*: “Come and show your film to everybody, and we’ll go with it.”

Kovanen: In Finland, age ratings are mandatory, and the standards for the council’s decision are often heavily influenced by culture and tradition. Finnish producers need to think about

accessibility, about what audience they want for their film, and this partly dictates the content. A +7 rating immediately excludes a part of your potential audience, and parents certainly consider these ratings.

According to the audience present, this age rating takes into account the

difference between horror in animated films and in live-action films. Because animated films take place in a clearly artificial environment and use elevated elements, they can more easily be situated in an imaginary world. Horror elements can also be resolved easily by physical comedy. Age ratings also take into consideration the time needed to release a certain tension. If you manage to do that within five to ten seconds, you can get away with almost everything.

Polarised

Lehemaa: Everything seems to fall back on the adults, and that is precisely the field in which you have worked for years, organising teacher training. Maybe the work that you and your colleagues are doing in media education will bring about a shift in attitudes towards horror cinema?

Kovanen: At a certain moment, there seemed to be a kind of shift, but nowadays, I see a backlash coming. Last year, there was controversy over Halloween in schools, with some political parties explicitly opposing it. Everything is getting more polarised! I frequently worked with trainee teachers who were still in school and was surprised to find an even more conservative, protective attitude towards



IRIS

horror and cinema among them.

Lehemaa: Several fields are clashing here. From an educational angle, there's a need for thoughtful analysis of films to help children navigate their feelings about stories and to give narratives a cultural context. But from the filmmaker's perspective, the main goal should be to create the best possible content for kids.

Fan base

Lehemaa: As a kid, I remember wandering into the living room while my dad was watching David Cronenberg's *THE FLY*. I happened to arrive at the exact moment when Jeff Goldblum

— already wielding his fly powers — breaks a man's hand and the bone pops out. That image is forever engraved in my frontal cortex. Now, as a filmmaker, I want to evoke a similar kind of emotional jolt in my audience. What is it about fear that fascinates us so deeply? What is it about horror that grips us all, children and adults alike?

Kovanen: Horror has often been studied from a psychological perspective. Many explanations have been put forward: evolutionary psychological explanations (people testing their reactions and reflexes), and cognitive psychological explanations (fictional horror providing a safe space



THE MYSTERY OF MISSING SOCKS

by testing emotions). But I think the issue is very individual, and probably doesn't even need to be explained so thoroughly. With my background in cultural studies, I'm more interested in horror as a community builder, with a strong fan base and subcultures focusing on specific horror aesthetics. I think that's fascinating!

The joy of survival

The audience was invited to share their personal liking of the horror genre: "They offer you the joy of survival. At the end, as an audience, you've got through it, and you're still there; you have survived all the dangers." - Lehe-

maa: "Unless someone dies during the screening... but that happens very rarely; statistically negligible."

Lehemaa: In the end, it's all about taking children and children's media seriously. We never really know what scares kids; they may be frightened by things we don't even think about, while remaining immune to other adult fears. That's why it's so important to give children the space and the tools they need to navigate a complicated—and often scary—media landscape.

—
Gert Hermans

Sylvia Szkiladz about AUTOKAR

"People came here without a plan"

AUTOKAR, an animated chronicle about Polish labour migration in the 1990s, premiered at the Berlinale. A little girl boards a Polish bus with Belgium as its final destination. The bus seems so big, the child is so small, and the journey is so long. When she loses her precious pencil, her search through the bus brings her face-to-face with her remarkable fellow passengers. In this way, director Sylvia Szkiladz gave shape to a childhood memory.

Times have changed; what happens in your film is completely unthinkable nowadays: a child has to travel thousands of kilometres on her own, on a bus from Poland to Brussels. But it is your story, and that of many children like you.

Sylvia Szkiladz: I arrived in Belgium in the 90s, when Poland was not yet a member of the European Union. People came here without a plan, without papers, not knowing what kind of work they might find, which was both exciting and frightening at the same time. Part of my family lived in Po-

land, another part lived in Belgium; as a child, I constantly travelled back and forth. Only when I grew older did I realise how unusual that situation was. It's an experience that I share with many kids of my generation.

If you wanted to take a "piece of home" with you, that happened through the food that you brought.

Szkiladz: My parents came from a rural region near Belarus, where people provided for their own livelihood. Moving to a new country without money or a home, the family wanted to ensure that there would at least be something to eat. I remember the bags and suitcases, bursting with food, and hard to carry; often, the handle broke off. The family sent us all that food not only because they thought we were starving abroad, but also so that we would think of them whenever we ate it. Through the food, they tried to be with us.

There must have been a tremendous sense of nostalgia in this community.



Szkiladz: Nostalgia isn't always a healthy driving force; at times, it kept me from moving forward. I felt as though I wasn't fully living in the present. As an adult, I wanted to move on in life, while preserving what mattered from those experiences. That's one of the things that pushed me to make this film.

What do all the people in the bus have in common?

Szkiladz: Only when seeing the finished film, I realised that all characters had lost something... a family, a home, a language, a pencil and each of them deals with it in their own way.

And they are all animals!

Szkiladz: We are watching through the eyes of an eight-year-old girl, coming from a village, surrounded by forest. She has heard all the stories people tell about forest animals and takes them literally. Her head is full of them. When she is afraid or overwhelmed by the trip, she digs into her imagination, and naturally, all those half-human characters appear. In this way, Agata brings something from her world onto the bus. These anthropomorphisms helped me tell a story that is close to my own. I needed some distance.

Agata's face looks minimalistic, no



more than a few stripes. How did you make her so expressive when you had so few elements to work with?

Szkiladz: Through the combination of explicit body language and naturalistic voices. Before we started working on the animation, we recorded the voices in Warsaw with Polish actors. We couldn't predict how Belgian animators would correctly shape an inner world through a language they didn't understand. Take, for example, the "bear" on the bus. The animator initially portrayed him as far too rude. Yet we needed to feel his human warmth, his underlying concern. Throughout the animation process, we prioritised emotion over technical

perfection.

Another interesting character is the she-wolf, who leaves the bus, wanders into the forest, and is later picked up again. What exactly is going on there?

Szkiladz: That's a typical question from the Western world. In Poland, everyone immediately understands what is happening in that border scene. We can assume she doesn't have the proper papers, so she crosses the border on foot through the forest and is picked up again on the other side. She introduces Agata to artistic creation, giving her the pencil and drawing with her. She is the only character who doesn't speak; we can

imagine she comes from even farther beyond Poland. What matters is how our perception changes throughout the story, even though she is initially presented as potentially unpleasant.

We also get to see how border controls were organised, with bribery and greedy border patrols.

Szkiladz: People sometimes tell me how the film gave them goose bumps, because it shows exactly how things were. Only a few years later, Poland joined the EU. Everything happened very quickly for us, and there was never enough time to emotionally process all these changes. These stories are rarely talked about; there is still a certain shame in speaking about them. People prefer to forget. It felt good to take the time to work on this sequence, but it was difficult for me to construct. I expected it to be easier.

How would you summarise your artistic journey to date?

Szkiladz: I was born in Poland, in Sokolka, near the Belarusian border; this region continues to inspire me. I grew up in Brussels. I arrived here when I was eight. For more than 12 years, I have been running animation workshops with a wide range of participants: children, teenagers, sen-

iors, animation students, in festivals, homework schools, kindergartens, retirement homes, migrant centres, in Poland, Belgium, Morocco, and France. This diversity of encounters has taught me how to tell stories quickly and collectively, with few resources. What matters most is the energy. I tried to bring that joy of creation into AUTOKAR.

At Cinekid, AUTOKAR won the Best International Short Film Award!

Szkiladz: All this was so unexpected! Because the setting of the film is so deeply Polish, I wasn't sure whether it would work internationally. After the Berlinale, we received a flood of festival invitations, and the film already won several awards. In the meantime, I am working on my next project, but I can't say much about it yet. The only thing I can reveal is that it will be an animated feature co-produced by Lithuania, France, and Belgium. The project is still in its early stages, but it is off to a very promising start.

—
Gert Hermans

Producer Arne Dahr about WITH GRACE

“You need to feed the forest”

In the short Norwegian documentary *WITH GRACE*, the 13-year-old title character, a witty girl with big dreams and an exceptional talent for making everyone laugh, introduces us to her loving farming family in Kenya. Spurred on by the devastating impact that nature has on their lives, Grace's father experiments with a simple method to make their environment more livable. Producer Arne Dahr can only watch in admiration.

Significantly, the film begins with the image of a tree.

Arne Dahr: Trees are so important for this film. This family is planting trees to let them grow into forests, which provide shade and humidity, even in the desert. You need to feed the forest until it is big enough to continue growing on its own. That is how an oasis will emerge.

In my garden, the plants all die, but in the desert, they can survive!

Dahr: The main idea of Kisilu, Grace's father, is to build a farm where people, animals, and plants can grow

into a new ecosystem. Desert ground can be cultivated, certainly in Kenya, where the soil is very fertile. The main problem is the lack of water. But if you plant seeds and water them for a while, the ecosystem evolves. Kisilu has gained the trust of his neighbours, who start following his example.

Those people's lives depend on whether there is water or not.

Dahr: So do our lives, but we don't feel it yet. This film is about climate change, affecting the lives of people living in the midst of nature, with nature, and cultivating nature. If the rain doesn't come, their entire life will change. They don't have the buffer zones that we have.

Grace's father is the one promoting this new way to survive nature's harsh reality.

Dahr: He is a visionary! Kisilu is a remarkable man who manages to gather his neighbours around him, form a community, and convince them of his mission. He manages to lead them positively, and people like his ideas



and want to try them out together.

He is also the one who breaks the circle. All the other fathers leave for the city to make money, but he wants to stay with his family.

Dahr: Grace has eight siblings, and you see Kisilu around his kids all the time. Whether there is a flood or a drought, or even if the house collapses, there's always a smile, and there's always friendliness. You never see him lose his temper. He is very different from the clichés about strict or absent fathers. The question if he will have to move to the city greatly concerns Grace.

What would make him leave his family?

Dahr: The necessity to make money to feed his family and pay for schooling, which is very expensive in Kenya. There are no public schools that offer free education, but he insists that his children, both sons and daughters, receive an education. Kisilu didn't leave; he is still with his family, and they manage to live off the farm. And there's one more hero in this film. Despite her worries, Kisilu's wife, Christina, is never stressed. She supports her husband and runs the family. In addition to climate change, this is also a film about hope and about good



parenting.

We see Grace looking at pictures of herself as a baby. Who took those pictures? How come you followed that family for so long?

Dahr: In 2017, director Julia Dahr made a film about Kisilu called THANK YOU FOR THE RAIN. That's when she met little Grace and decided to come back later to make a film about her; we're observing her father through her eyes. Julia is extremely devoted to this theme. She became friends with the family, and over the years, she returned many times. She has lived with them, and Kisilu came to Norway to visit her. The images you see of Grace as a little girl are footage that was shot over the years on all those trips.

You decided to use a voiceover.

Dahr: We had many discussions about that. It's Grace's voice that you hear, both in English and in her own language, and there's a third version available in Norwegian.

You can hear her laughter after every sentence she says.

Dahr: That's typical for Grace - it was real, and that's why we didn't cut it. Voicing the film was a complicated process. Grace had to travel to the

capital, Nairobi, which is a two-day trip for her. She made it with Dina Mwende, our Kenyan co-director. But Grace is attending a boarding school, and they didn't want to give her time off. We needed to talk to the principal, and many other people were involved. But we insisted on having her voice, and despite the complicated process, it worked out very well.

Grace recalls many fond memories. And there's one particularly beautiful story about a yellow dress.

Dahr: I'm happy that you like the story. We had the BBC involved in the production; they were very much into all these details, and the yellow dress was one of them. They insisted that we see that dress, but the directors didn't want it, and we didn't have the image. So we had to come up with a creative solution. It's a strong little story within the bigger film.

She recounts how the dress made her feel like a princess, until a storm blew it away.

Dahr: *"And I never saw my yellow dress again."* Her mother lost all her underwear in that storm, and that makes everybody laugh, even though the house has collapsed.

What else should we pick up from



life in that village?

Dahr: People live outside all the time. There isn't even a door to mark where "inside" begins. You only go inside to sleep or have some shade. They eat together, but not like us, having three meals a day. The family eats when there is food; even if mum starts cooking in the middle of the night, everybody wakes up to eat. For Grace, this is a lovely memory. Audiences need to see how people are living and having a good time like that.

Is that a message you want to convey to your audience?

Dahr: The film is being shown on several TV channels, including the BBC, and has been screened at at least 90

festivals. Julia would like to go back once more and make a third film about Christina, to show life in Kenya from a woman's perspective.

Is it correct that this film is a 'project of love' from an uncle for his niece?

Dahr: Julia is my niece, and I'm her godfather. When several employees in Julia's company, Differ Media, became pregnant at the same time, I stepped in to finish two projects in production. I stayed for almost two years.

—
Gert Hermans



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Place de l'Amitié 6, 1160 Brussels, Belgium

Phone: +32 475 55 02 97

Email: mail@ecfaweb.org

Website: www.ecfaweb.org

Please send press releases, advertisements, questions & information to:
Gert Hermans, journal@ecfaweb.org

ECFA's goal is to support cinema for children and youth in its cultural, economic, aesthetic, social, political and educational aspects. Since 1988 ECFA brings together a wide range of European film professionals and associations, producers, directors, distributors. ECFA aims to set up a working structure in every European country for films for children and young people, a structure adapted to Europe's multicultural interests.

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European Children's Film Association

Phone: +32 (0)475 55 02 97

Email: mail@ecfaweb.org

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Contributors to this issue:

Gert Hermans (Editor)

Reinhold Schöffel, Felix Vanginderhuysen, Gudrun Sommer, Hilde Steenssens, Pelin Su Ozdogan, Anna Bataglia, Pantelis Panteloglou, Marjo Kovanen, Oskar Lehemaa, Remke Oosterhuis, Jaroslava Hynstova, Kärt Väinola, Luca Stradmann.

Proofreading: Adam Graham

Design: Stefan Köneke

ECFA website: Udo Lange