



**European Children's
Film Association**
Association Européenne du Cinéma
pour l'Enfance et la Jeunesse

interviews

Fantastique

**ECFA Awards:
Circusboy**

**ECFA Awards: Hannah
& The Crocodile**

**Cinema of Care: Cactus
Festival**

**Youth Cinema
Network**

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A NEW ERA

ECFA is entering a new era. Our General Secretary - the person most closely identified with ECFA and the key figure in its day-to-day operation - dear Felix, is stepping down after 38 years of distinguished service.

Continuing a discussion that has been ongoing for several years, we made decisive progress in fulfilling Felix Vanginderhuysen's own wish: to relieve him of his day-to-day responsibilities in the best possible way for the future. We issued an open call, to which several members responded, and after months of consultation, **the Board concluded to entrust the ECFA Secretariat to the Film'On International Film Festival for Young Audiences in Brussels.**

I would like to highlight three points that allow us to look to the future with optimism while also defining our shared priorities.

1. ECFA has deep roots in the European landscape. It is both the product and the vehicle of a pioneering group of people, led by Felix, who decided to transform the European landscape and created an instrument for cooperation and mutual development. To a great extent, they succeeded, and this is an important legacy for both the present and the future. For this, we thank Felix, the members of previous boards, and all those who have consistently contributed to fulfilling the Association's objectives.

2. ECFA is bigger than ever. The mosaic of members demonstrates that many creative people are engaged in cinema for children and young people, film education, and related fields. Despite the difficulties faced by the film industry, the education sector, and culture in general, our field continues to grow and deepen. At the same time, the broader social, economic, and technological context of the audiovisual industry presents needs that our member organisations are well-equipped to meet with confidence.

3. In Film'On's colleagues, ECFA has found an ideal support framework. The Board is acquiring a new operational mechanism. This arrangement enables us to modernise aspects of our activities that have become outdated. We are moving from a structure in which most people turned to Felix for everything (and he always had the answer!) to a more collective model of responsibility, one that matches the responsibility now being passed on to us. It is something the younger generation owes to the older one, if we want decades of effort not to go to waste, and if we are to fulfill the goals we set for ourselves.

So, here's to a good new beginning!

–
Pantelis Pánteloglou
ECFA President

Marjolijn Prins on FANTASTIQUE

“Their bodies and strength mean everything to them”

Fanta, a 14-year-old contortionist, lives in Conakry, Guinea. She and her friend Makhissa are the only girls training with the circus. Just as Fanta is about to seize the opportunity to tour Europe, her mother falls ill. Her training intensity suffers, and she begins to question whether her dream really lies in circus life. In FANTASTIQUE, Belgian-Dutch documentary maker Marjolijn Prins follows the young performer as she searches for her own voice and tries to speak up about what truly matters to her.

In the opening scene, there's wind, water, and people whispering... Fanta's mother performs a spiritual ceremony to protect her daughter, washing her with herbal water. This sets the tone for FANTASTIQUE: one moment, we're in the middle of circus pandemonium, bursting with colour, motion and sound; the next, we find ourselves in a quiet gathering. Throughout the film, high and low energy constantly alternate.

Marjolijn Prins: We noticed it during

filming; it was either calm and serene, or very hectic; there was almost no in-between. Often, that calm was imposed by circumstances: the need to rest after a tough workout, or yet another power cut. We shaped the balance in the edit, moving from group dynamics to intimacy.

What exactly happened seven years ago?

Prins: That's when I first met the acrobats of the Amoukanama circus association. Based in Matam, Guinea, they travel all over the world. Their energy felt truly inspiring. They told me about their lives back home, and I was fascinated by how these world-class performers grew up under difficult circumstances. When they invited me to Guinea, I jumped at the chance. After that, I kept going back, at least four times.

Was Fanta immediately the one in focus?

Prins: Not at all. We travelled to Guinea intending to make a film about the youngest member of the group. He



was 14 at the time and about to go on his first European tour, and we wanted to follow that journey. But during one of the training sessions, this girl suddenly walked in, the very first girl to join the group. She looked so confident, pulling off these incredible tricks, and I was completely blown away. At that moment, I knew: Fanta is the one.

Circus seems like a national sport in Guinea.

Prins: The energy is everywhere, especially in Matam, the district of Conakry

where these artists come from. In the past, this very physical discipline was mainly for boys; girls were expected to fulfill their household duties. But now, more and more girls are joining circuses and acrobatic groups.

Let's be honest: There are some impressive physiques on display! Those guys look super fit and not shy about showing it.

Prins: From a young age, they train their fitness, day in, day out. Their bodies and strength mean everything to them; it's what should secure their



future, and what they're most proud of.

What exactly attracted Fanta to the circus?

Prins: Her mother says she was doing acrobatics before she could even walk. She must have been born with very flexible joints. One day, a nephew introduced her to the group. They immediately noticed her talent and invited her to join. Her father was somewhat opposed to the idea; he didn't want his daughter drawing so much attention by training with boys. But her mother fully trusted and supported her.

The film brims with female confidence, but the real strength, for me, lies with Fanta's mother.

Prins: She has complete faith in her daughter and combines great wisdom with worldly knowledge. When she speaks, it's like poetry. She gave the project her blessing; without it, the film would never have been made. Perhaps she saw in me an example of a woman charting her own course. Things got harder for her when she fell ill. We show Fanta's mother in both moments of strength and vulnerability.

As for Fanta herself, I found it hard-



er to grasp who she really is. She seems introverted, and her expression is often slightly skeptical.

Prins: Working with such an introverted main character is challenging. While reviewing the footage, we found very few scenes in which she speaks. But that's also part of her strength; it gives her an almost mystical presence that drew me in. Not everything needs to be said; her actions speak for themselves, and her great dedication is proof of her ambition. If you were to meet Fanta in person, you'd likely have the same impression.

The contortionism acts can be hard to watch. Their bodies are so flexi-

ble that I'm constantly afraid they might hurt themselves.

Prins: During screenings, we often hear the audience literally groan - "ouch". Especially when Makhissa cracks her neck. She can move her head like an owl! I'm deeply impressed by what the human body is capable of. The foundation of what they do is yoga. Fanta never skips a day doing her yoga exercises.

At a certain point, it seems like she's losing interest.

Prins: Besides the pressure from school, I think the main reason is the physical pain. As a child, your body is flexible, but as you grow older, it becomes more demanding. The only

answer she gets from the acrobats is: "You just have to push through." I've never met a circus artist who didn't deal with pain. It's like Olympic gymnastics: the older you get, the tougher it becomes. Fanta and Makhissa would benefit from proper coaching. The men's acrobatics rely heavily on force, while the girls might benefit from a softer type of training.

Circuses in Guinea come with live music!

Prins: Yeah, those drums... every filmmaker's nightmare, as they make it impossible to capture any sound other than this pulsating beat.

What is typical of Conakry?

Prins: We mostly filmed in the Matam district, where we spent most of our time. At night, the streets fill with music and the smell of food. Conakry stimulates all your senses; from the intense heat to the smells, sounds, colours, and the way the light falls. For me, Conakry represents above all the warmth of a community where you can find peace when the hustle and bustle of the city becomes too much. With a bit of luck, you might witness the flying foxes returning to their night-time roosts against a magical sunset, whilst fishermen haul in their nets in the last light of day.



You include small glimpses of wild-life: close-ups of animals and nature. This must have been done with a purpose.

Prins: As a documentary, FANTASTIQUE holds a touch of magical realism. When we first arrived in Guinea, I sensed something spiritual in the air. Stories and myths feel very present; there is a deep respect for the supernatural, and every animal, even a butterfly or insect, is treated with respect. I wanted to weave those elements into a magical storyline in which nature plays an active role. These images highlight that unique connection.

Mami Wata is a part of that magical layer - the spiritual power of the sea?

Prins: Yes, and it's very strong. There are many vivid stories about Mami Wata in Guinea. The sea is seen as a feminine, almost feminist force, and all the rituals in the film take place near the coast. It's a strong, natural force from which fishermen bring in food. Wherever you go in the world, people find solace in the sea.

In that sense, you slightly push beyond the boundaries of traditional documentary.

Prins: But we didn't push very hard, not as much as in the scenario phase. We had Fanta, Makhissa, Fanta's mother, and then, on top of it, we suddenly had her grandmother joining in too! There were plenty of strong female presences. We didn't feel the need for an additional female character in the form of the sea, so we focused instead on the poetic power of water. That magical layer brings a sense of tranquility to the film. Everyone is constantly telling Fanta what to do - in those magical moments, we give Fanta space to listen to herself and speak up about what she wants.

Why would FANTASTIQUE qualify as a children's documentary?

Prins: It was conceived that way from the start. In fact, the film, which was initially planned as a short documentary, grew alongside Fanta. Children get swept up in the film's rhythm, which is very much alive and kicking. And I hope that touch of magical realism helps them connect more deeply with the story. I noticed that many stories about West Africa don't reflect reality—I hope FANTASTIQUE can challenge those stereotypes. Fanta and her group are incredibly proud of the film, which was always our main ambition.



You took the script to the Young Horizons script lab. Did that help shape the structure?

Prins: A lot! Discussing the script with people from across Europe is incredibly valuable; it pushes you to work hard, time and time again, to fix flaws, foster a better understanding, and bring the audience closer to the story. At first, I was a bit sceptical: how to write a scenario for a documentary when you don't know what will happen? But it helps you define the core strength of the project. The foundation of the film was in that scenario, even if reality led us to make some minor changes.

In the end, the circle closes, and we

are treated to a circus performance. It felt like a gift to the audience: the cinema vibrates with an explosion of sound and motion.

Prins: Even after seeing the film probably 200 times, I still get goosebumps at that moment. My editor and I really struggled to find the right ending until we realised we needed to go out with that burst of energy. We also owed it to the group to show how their hard work paid off. Young people hate open endings, so this was the only right way to do it.

—
Gert Hermans

Julia Lemke & Anna Koch on CIRCUSBOY

No escape from the oom-pah-toom-pah

Documentaries for young audiences are a bit like circus artists; they come with a certain stigma, and they're only trusted for as long as the show lasts. None of that applies to CIRCUSBOY, in which we get to know Santino and his grandfather, a young and an old member of a circus family, who give us a glimpse into their wondrous world. "We'll never really belong," says Grandpa... But they do, at least for ECFA, who awarded Julia Lemke and Anna Koch's film as Best Documentary.

Your entire story is structured around the changing seasons.

Julia Lemke: Our audience has little experience with documentaries, so giving the story a structure makes it more accessible. We stay true to life, being a loose jumble of events that sometimes culminate and sometimes lead nowhere, but the seasons always come and go. Our characters' lives change with the seasons. The film starts in spring, when everything feels lush and easy. During the harsh winter, life becomes harder, but in the

end, we return to spring. It's a circular story, just like life itself: you are born, you live, and then you die.

The film starts with Santino's birthday. While every kid in the audience is probably thinking, "wow, he's getting a motorbike," Santino seems just as happy with a necklace, a symbol of belonging.

Lemke: This sense of belonging is a big thing in Santino's family. They live humble lives, but they know how to survive. And they can only survive by sticking together; living outside the family context is hard. If you change schools every other week, saying goodbye to everyone you met, then your family becomes the only stable thing in your life. These children know their family history. Our kids don't, but Santino does.

Anna Koch: The necklace means he's a grown-up now, and that one day he'll have his own caravan and all the responsibilities that come with it.

Lemke: But he liked the motorbike too!



That sensitive boy grows up in quite a tough world.

Lemke: The family we were looking for had to tick a lot of boxes. We needed a child and a senior from a warm family who could dispel the prejudices and stigma that circus people face. Finding that whole package was difficult. Then one day, we were sitting in a caravan with an elderly circus director, listening to his stories, when the door suddenly opened and his grandson walked in. He was open and curious; he had a sharp eye and kept asking his grandad for more stories. We melted immediately. Santino added so much to the film through his

personality and his relationship with his grandfather.

You must have felt blessed with his grandfather!

Lemke: Whenever we see something striking or moving, we tend to pinch each other's legs. That day, in that caravan, we pinched until it really hurt, because we realised we had 50% of the movie in place. In a lifetime, you meet a few truly special people, and he's one of them. He carries the lore of those traditions, and because he used to run a puppet theatre, he could translate them beautifully for children.





He is probably the only person you have ever met who can truthfully say he slept with an elephant.

Koch: Not if you spend time around circus people! Children will instantly connect with the magic of sleeping beside an elephant. Wouldn't you want to try it?

Lemke: Nowadays, the circus isn't that glamorous anymore - often, it can feel rather tragic - but once, it was. The animations help bring back those glamorous days, traveling with a world-famous elephant. When you get old, there must be a deep longing to tell your stories and find somebody who wants to listen.

Grandpa left me speechless when he started talking about the war. Especially when he says: "You'll never be one of them. You will always be an outsider."

Lemke: "They'll forget you the moment you leave." They have a long history of not belonging, and they're very aware of it. Apart from knowing they had Sinti roots, we knew very little about their background, and we surely didn't know about the war or Auschwitz. On the drive back to Berlin, we were like: What are we going to do now? We never planned to talk about Auschwitz in a children's film, but now there's no way around it.

I try to imagine your phone call to

the animator: "You know, there was all this funny stuff about elephants, but now..."

Lemke: We quickly realised we didn't have the tools to tell this story, or to explain Auschwitz to children.

Koch: His story was far too brutal for our target audience. We needed his words, his unique storytelling, but this seemed to be the one story he couldn't adapt for children - it was simply too shocking. We contacted experts from the Holocaust Education Centre and the German Sinti Association, and then went back to re-record it. It was very painful for him to tell the story over and over.

The impact of that scene is enormous.

Lemke: The whole scene lasts no more than 45 seconds, but you can't just drop a bomb on your audience and then move on, leaving them alone with these thoughts.

Koch: The question was where to go afterwards. How long can you stretch that moment before the silence starts to feel artificial, and what could be the next scene? It needed to feel right. So we continue with all the kids sitting together with their aunt and Grandma, almost as proof: they are alive. These people survived, and they take care of each other.

The circus world is such a cinematic gift. Visually chaotic at times, but truly a gift!

Lemke: A gift with terrible lighting! People imagine the circus as something beautiful and glamorous. Often, it's a bunch of caravans, parked in some shitty village. If you want glamour, you have to look elsewhere. We wanted to tell the story from backstage; so often I found myself standing in the way of passing camels or galloping horses. For these people, only one thing matters: the show must go on! It may look like glamour and popcorn on the outside, but behind it, there's a hard life and a loving family.

Sitting in the crowd, you stare at those beautiful acrobats in sparkling costumes. But once you're backstage, you see ordinary people in worn-out costumes. There isn't much glamour to find in a run-down caravan.

Koch: It's the lights, the music, and the show that create the magic. It's like going to a club. The moment the lights switch on in the morning, there's not much glamour left. That is what life is like: one moment you think you're living in paradise, and the next, the lights switch on.





“You need to love being in the spotlight,” Grandpa says. They all do?

Lemke: You’re not born wanting to be in the spotlight. It’s not genetic. But they grow up with it, so it no longer scares them. Still, you’re allowed not to be in the spotlight; you don’t have to continue the family tradition. People can leave the circus, and some family members did, but it’s difficult. For Santino and his brother, it would be very hard to step away from that path. Why should they?

Koch: They can’t all be daredevils; there are other jobs in the circus. Not many, but if you don’t want to perform in the ring, you can do the lights or the music, or sell popcorn.

Santino’s brother, on the other hand, seems born for the circus.

Koch: He’s a natural - the born heir. There’s no doubt he is going to be the next director. He doesn’t ask questions; he’s doing the job. From morning till evening, he wants to go, go, go, and work for the circus. He’s completely devoted to this lifestyle and would never question it.

Can circuses still travel with animals in Germany?

Koch: We never fully understood all the legal details; these decisions are made at a local level. But our circus only had farm animals, including camels and Texas longhorn cattle.

Those cows look super dangerous, but I never quite understood what their act is.

Koch: They just run around. That’s the act. And everyone in the front row freaks out when those horns come charging past.

Lemke: It’s the ultimate excuse to criticise the circus and look down on it: *“They don’t take proper care of their animals!”* Of course, we chose a circus with animals; they’re proud of that tradition, and animals are fun in a children’s film. But we wanted healthy animals in good condition – we didn’t want to turn the camera away every time a sick camel stumbled into frame. The animals help tell all those stories from the past, about a magnificent elephant. Circuses are criticised for failing to move with the times, but they have adapted to the modern world, while still holding on to old traditions.

After just 10 seconds, I already felt sorry for you. I thought: throughout the entire film, these directors are doomed to use circus music, with no escape from the oom-pah-toom-pah.

Koch: It’s iconic! Our composer wanted to record those circus instruments live, with all the squeaks and beeps intact - because that’s exactly how the circus sounds: never perfect, sometimes slightly out of tune. We

all agreed one extra layer was missing, and we found it in the accordion, an instrument that carries a certain melancholy. When we took the result into the editing room, everybody was instantly moved.

Lemke: While travelling with the family, we heard the clown singing in the car - a song by a Sinti singer. Now he performs it as the closing song of our score, in a modern interpretation.

CIRCUSBOY was developed as the first documentary in the Outstanding Children’s Film programme.

Koch: It matched our ambitions perfectly: to make a documentary for a broad audience, like the programme didn’t have one already. The programme places great importance on the film and on the positive outlook it should carry. That lent CIRCUSBOY its final tonality and helped the film find its audience. In the end, it all came together in a very natural way.

–
Gert Hermans



Lore Mechelaere on HANNAH & THE CROCODILE

“The crocodile would keep reappearing”

No matter how many awards ECFA had presented, Lore Mechelaere could have won all of them with *HANNAH & THE CROCODILE*: Best Short (for which she was awarded), Best Documentary (the film was developed as part of the Belgian Ket & Doc programme), Most Original Cut-out Animation, and above all, Most Urgent Theme. With incredible ingenuity and in a clever visual language, Mechelaere succeeds in making the inscrutability of an eating disorder comprehensible.

Fien watches helplessly as her sister Hannah is threatened by a vicious crocodile that is making her thin and ill. Together with their parents, Fien and Hannah try to defeat the crocodile so that Hannah can make it to her next birthday.

Could it just as well have been HANNAH & THE GIRAFFE?

Lore Mechelaere: Absolutely. I was looking for a metaphor that could separate the psychosomatic illness from Hannah’s persona. Eating dis-

orders are often directly linked to a person: *Why aren’t you eating? Why are you eating so much?* As if you’re fully in control. But an eating disorder often means losing control, while at the same time searching for a way to regain it. When Fien discovers that other people struggle with similar conditions, you see reflections of different animal species. They represent all kinds of illnesses that remain invisible on the outside, yet gradually become part of your life, and at some point even take it over.

That crocodile leaves its mark on the film. What a monster!

Mechelaere: Hannah told me that her psychiatrist asked her to choose figurines to represent her family, along with one for her eating disorder. She chose a crocodile.

The image of the crocodile on the car roof is incredibly powerful.

Mechelaere: When the family first saw the film, that scene hit them hard. The weight and sadness of the image make it clear that things aren’t going



well. They found themselves laughing one moment and crying the next.

The crocodile often repeats, in that sinister voice: “Nobody is your friend except me.” Is that literally what a voice like that tells you?

Mechelaere: This is actually the censored version of the crocodile. In reality, it says much harsher things: *you’re worthless, nobody loves you...* We chose a safer middle ground that would also resonate with children who may not struggle with a crocodile themselves, but encounter it in someone close to them.

It’s the story of two sisters. How important is that sisterly bond?

Mechelaere: At first, Hannah and Fien

are super close. But gradually, distance grows between them. Even before the parents notice anything, Fien senses that something more is going on than ordinary teenage behaviour. That’s often how an eating disorder develops in young people, although it manifests differently from person to person. Their bond is affected not only by the age gap between them but also by the illness itself.

You set yourself an almost impossible challenge in two ways. The film tries to explain something that is incredibly difficult to explain, and people also expect the film to solve something that is incredibly difficult to solve.

Mechelaere: A happy ending was nev-



er an option. You can say there is progress, but it's not an illness that suddenly disappears. Hannah still goes through difficult periods; this isn't a fairy tale with a neatly wrapped-up ending. If we were to make a second or third film about Hannah's life, the crocodile would keep reappearing. At the same time, Hannah's courage in sharing her story has set many things in motion: it gave me the courage to tell my own personal story, and I received many messages from people who felt less alone after watching the film. In its own way, that is also a kind of happy ending.

Is that how you measure the film's impact?

Mechelaere: Absolutely. I received a moving email from Canada, for example, but I couldn't attend the festival there because I had been admitted to the hospital again myself. Many psychologists and dietitians use the film, sometimes even during the first session. HANNAH & THE CROCODILE had an incredible festival run, and a booklet was created alongside it - those were all concrete goals I had in mind. Winning an ECFA Award is wonderful, but for me it's mainly about recognition. Because of my own mental health, I was rarely able to travel with the film and meet the audiences, but

I received many messages and emails in response.

Because the film's subject matter is so intense, people rarely get the chance to talk about the cinematography. Even though it's also an incredibly beautiful film.

Mechelaere: I'm happy that, as a director, I found the right visual language for the film. I kept fighting for it, even when the producers tried to hold things back. The recognition the film is receiving now gives me extra confidence, although I may need to become a little more realistic. Then again, without a certain naïveté, I never could have made this project.

You mean financially?

Mechelaere: Whenever the producer said, "*This is impossible,*" I would say, "*No, we'll make it work, we'll launch a crowdfunding campaign.*" Working with animator Frederic Tilleman was a blessing; he put in many extra days of work. Whenever the producer started despairing, I'd look at Frederic as if to say, "We'll work it out ourselves". We both kept working extra hours, unpaid, simply because we cared deeply about the project.

You won the ECFA Award for Best Short, not Best Documentary, even



though the film was conceived as such. I've heard people argue that HANNAH & THE CROCODILE isn't really a documentary.

Mechelaere: People get far too hung up on those labels; I think the distinction is outdated. They can always call me, and I'll explain it to them. Or I can send them photos of Hannah, because this truly is her story. But I didn't want to show someone with an eating disorder on screen, because the focus would automatically shift to visible characteristics and to how shocking they may or may not appear. That was a conscious and responsible decision.

Did you feel a sense of responsibility while making this film?

Mechelaere: We spent a long time dis-

cussing whether to use Hannah's real name, a decision we made together with Hannah and her family. It wasn't easy - not everyone around her knew about what she was going through. Thanks to the film, she gradually became more open about her story, which earned her a great deal of respect. We involved Hannah closely throughout the project; she reviewed every detail, because I wanted her to recognise herself in the story. Later, an accompanying booklet was created as well, though that version creates more distance. It's no longer strictly her story, even if it's based on the same events.

- [Gert Hermans](#)

Sustainability @ The Cactus International Children's & Youth Film Festival

cactus

INTERNATIONAL
FILM FESTIVAL

A humble festival in a green valley is doing everything it can to keep that valley green. May we introduce: the Cactus Festival in Aosta, Italy.

Alessandro Stevanon, introducing the Cactus Festival

The Cactus International Children's & Youth Film Festival is still very young: it was founded in 2021, during the pandemic. For many years, I worked for the Frontdoc documentary festival in Aosta, while curating events and screenings for adult audiences in my region. At the same time, I worked as a filmmaker and author, creating shorts and documentaries on childhood and youth. This led me to visit several children's film festivals where my films were selected, including Schlingel and Olympia. I immediately fell in love with the atmosphere and with the people I met there.

During the pandemic, when Europe was in lockdown, I brought all these experiences together by creating a children's film festival in our region. Our first edition was very small - just one day - due to all the COVID restrictions in place. But we survived! In the



Alessandro Stevanon

Aosta Valley, there are few cultural events aimed at young audiences, and the festival grew quickly, attracting around 10,000 visitors to our latest edition. Alongside the festival, we continue to develop Cactus Edu, an online film literacy project aimed at schools across Italy. This year, we reached around 74,000 students. That is the positive legacy of those dark COVID years: a project born out of isolation has become a space for connection and participation.

10 QUESTIONS ABOUT CINEMA OF CARE

What does the word "care" specifically mean to you in a cultural context? How do you see yourself as part of a 'Cinema of Care' movement?

Alessandro Stevanon: The "care" element is central to all initiatives we have developed, not only during the festival, but throughout the year. For us, it means paying close attention to

people, content, ambitions, and opportunities that emerge within the context we live in. We want to make the festival a place where we ourselves would have liked to grow up: welcoming, curious, and attentive. Themes such as sustainability have been central since the festival's creation, and year after year, we have developed them more concretely. We carefully select our partners, working with organisations focused on disability, NGOs, volunteers, and everyone who can help us make the festival more accessible for all audiences. People with special needs are not treated as a separate section of the festival; we simply want to ensure that everyone who visits Cactus can do so in the best possible conditions.

The aspect of care that the Cactus Festival emphasises most strongly is sustainability.

Stevanon: From the very first edition, we have sought to maximise the festival's sustainability. Through an internal assessment, we identified our resources and practices and how we





could improve. All materials we use - paper, banners, lanyards, badges, etc. - are recycled or will be upcycled for future editions. Our T-shirts are Fairtrade, made from organic cotton. Our electricity provider works with 100% renewable energy. In our catalogue, we include films on environmental issues, and we present a special award in that category. Even the Cactus trophies are conceived with this approach in mind: starting from an original work made of local wood, they are 3D-printed in bioplastic. If directors are unable to attend the festival in person, we send the file so they can print it locally. Every year, we further reduce our CO₂ emissions and plant around 30 trees. Our catering uses local products (however, our traditional food is not exactly vegetarian). We feel blessed by our surroundings - the Alps encircle the city, with all their forests, wildlife, and extraordinary natural landscape. These values are part of our identity, which we want to pass on to our young audience.

Do you have specific projects aimed at promoting this idea of sustainability?

Stevanon: Some of our workshops focus on environmental issues. Last year, we held a workshop on disappearing glaciers, working with both

scientists and people from our valley. We apply the same principles to all materials we use - from paper to ink and paint. However, it is becoming more challenging, as the festival grows so quickly and therefore requires more and more resources.

For ambitions like these, strong partnerships are essential.

Stevanon: We work with a wide range of partners, from electricity suppliers and printing companies to specialised consultants. Each year, we carry out assessments to guide our growth process. That requires a significant investment in terms of dedication, energy, and time.

That must have financial consequences and budgetary implications

Stevanon: Recyclable materials are very expensive, and our regional funding bodies do not provide additional incentives for sustainability. It's an ethical commitment we made, but if we want to continue being a green festival, additional financial support will be required.

How can you, as a festival, inspire your European colleagues?

Stevanon: ECFA can be an important multiplier. One reason we grew up so quickly was the ECFA community. By



serving in ECFA juries, I traveled to several festivals, each with its own approach and vision. Every time you experience a different festival atmosphere, you add another brick to the construction of your own event. In our case, sustainability has been a key factor from the start, and now we can offer inspiration and practical solutions to others who want to move in that same direction.

I'm curious to know who inspired you!

Stevanon: What hugely impressed me at the Athens International Children's Film Festival were their efforts in inclusion and accessibility. Their approach is unique. I was also deeply impressed by the international community of young people gathered at the Camera Zizanio Festival. Observing that energy and sense of belonging, I remember thinking: this is what I would love Cactus to feel like in 10 years. Such experiences helped us grow, not only as a festival but as human beings. I rarely found that atmosphere at the big adult festivals I visited, where there is plenty of business activity but very little genuine human interaction. In the children's film scene, big and small festivals sit at the same table, creating a safe space where we can support one another.



Are these simply concrete actions, or is there a theoretical framework behind them? Did you have to study the academic side, or did you just follow your gut feeling?

Stevanon: As a father of four, I am concerned about the future of our planet. At first, our focus was mainly on the environment; today, we are also facing war conflicts. I want my children - all children! - to inherit a better place to live. In the beginning, our approach was very instinctive, but through research and with the help of expert partners, we gradually moved towards a more methodical approach. We asked an external organisation to assess all the festival's sustainable practices, and they awarded us the

Ecoactions certificate from Legambiente, the Italian environmental association - a recognition we are very proud of.

Do you have a dream project in mind that you could realise with an unlimited budget?

Stevanon: I would invest it in improving accessibility, because this is where the costs are often very high. Audio description, subtitling for the hearing-impaired, and other accessibility services require specific skills and experienced professionals. It is not easy to find the right people, but this is one of the domains in which we most want to grow.

Do you feel a greater sense of responsibility regarding care and social engagement because you organise an event for children?

Stevanon: I'm not only a father and a children's festival director; I'm also a former primary school teacher. Every step of my life has been dedicated to the next generation. This gave me a sense of responsibility as an adult to make the earth a better place than it is today.

—
Gert Hermans

Is your organisation involved in initiatives focused on care or solidarity? 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'.

25 Years of ECFAweb

25 years ago, in June 2001, www.ecfaweb.org - the website of the European Children's Film Association - was launched. It was created for a specific reason that became clear during the '1st European Conference on the Distribution of Films for the Young Audience', organised by ECFA and German Bundesverband Jugend und Film e.V. (BJF) in Konstanz in 1999.

More than 40 European arthouse distributors with an interest in children's films gathered to discuss how the distribution of European titles could be improved. Information and cooperation were keywords, and it soon became clear that a website could serve as a tool for establishing and developing such a distribution network.

At the time, ECFA had around 30 members and no big budget. It was BJF's IT administrator, Udo Lange, who designed the website on a small budget, based on ECFA's visual identity.

From the beginning, the site included its main sections: Production, Festivals, Distribution, Exhibition, Film Education, alongside databases of films,

festivals, and contact information. Each section also served as an archive of material collected during conferences, offering useful resources that could inspire new ideas for children's film culture. One section featured links to the members' websites and other relevant webpages. Later, the ECFA Board decided to remove part of this information, as some files were regarded as outdated.

The original idea of these databases was for all producers, festivals, sales agents, distributors, and TV-programmers to send their acquisitions to ECFA for publication, to improve cooperation. Festivals could discover new films and where to get them; distributors could use the same informa-

tion to prospect titles together with young audiences at nearby festivals; producers could search for suitable partners in sales and distribution.

There were serious doubts about whether this information would actually be shared with us, and unfortunately, we were right. From the beginning, our editors had to actively search for new titles themselves and track their journey through festivals and catalogues. As a result, the databases could never be entirely complete; something would always be missing. Nevertheless, over the years, they have grown into ECFA's most crucial knowledge resource, as confirmed both by the results of a questionnaire launched in 2024 and

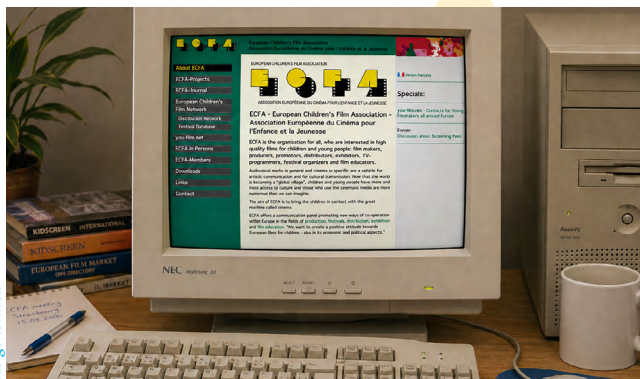
by the web statistics. And it's a good idea nonetheless: producers, festivals, sales agents, distributors, and TV-programmers are still invited to share updates on European content for children with ECFA.

Until 2015, the website's content was edited by BJF managing director Reinhold T. Schöffel, while Udo Lange remained responsible for the technical side, a role he continues to fulfil today. In 2015, communication officer Gert Hermans took over responsibility for the website's content - relaunched according to ECFA's new corporate design - while Schöffel continued maintaining the databases of feature films, festivals, and addresses. Through the Children's Films First project, ECFA received support to add three new databases: European short films, study guides, and European film literacy professionals, managed by Günther Kinstler.

Now, after 25 years, the databases contain information on 213 film festivals, 3460 feature films (60+ min.) for children, 2520 useful contacts, and 1335 short films (up to 59 min.). Each year, ECFA's website attracts around 1 million visitors.

- Reinhold T. Schöffel

AI-generated



Abhay Punjabi on TO FETCH A PAIL OF WATER

“The Rosebud moment comes for everyone”

Santu wants a swimming pool, but there’s no running water in Delhi. Across the alley, Vivaan longs for an internship in the US, while Fiza dreams of playing for the national cricket team. With *TO FETCH A PAIL OF WATER* (formerly known as *PUKAM PUKAI*), Indian director Abhay Punjabi brings the sparkle of summer to the screen, in a film brimming with friendship, mischief, and wild dreams.

If you could sum up the film in one word, what would it be?

Abhay Punjabi: Friendship is love.

That’s more spiritual than my pick. I had: water management. Many of the film’s events are set in motion by water scarcity: the dream of a swimming pool, the communal toilet, the death of someone who drinks contaminated water...

Punjabi: One key difference between privileged and underprivileged classes is their access to water. I come from a privileged background, and in our family, water was always easy to get, at least by Indian standards. My

co-writer Manish, who grew up without a permanent home, had a very different experience. What felt normal to me wasn’t for him. People still die from contaminated water, but it’s not recognised as a major issue by the community. But it is! Through water, we explore those inequalities.

Do the blue lorries in the film provide extra water distribution?

Punjabi: Those “tankers” deliver water to areas where the mains supply is temporarily or permanently cut off. In those neighbourhoods, the government is supposed to provide free water twice a day, morning and evening. However, this opens the door to black-market sales, suppliers charging for water, delayed deliveries, and so on. Such practices are very common.

From your film, I get a strong sense of your love for stories and for your people.

Punjabi: *TO FETCH A PAIL OF WATER* draws on two important encounters in my life. There’s my friendship with co-author Manish (who plays the char-



acter of Mangal). And there is my (ex) life partner, who happened to be a half-Muslim while I come from a Hindu background. Somewhere in that wondering, the film started writing itself. I build on Mahatma Gandhi’s ideas of pluralism and interfaith harmony - he lived and died for Hindu-Muslim unity. That’s why the character of Fiza is normalising the Muslim hijabi girl and her family as smoothly and comically as possible.

Class differences run throughout the entire film.

Punjabi: We’re exploring the caste

system, without ever using the word “caste.” I come from an upper-class background, while Manish comes from a “scavenger family,” just like Santu. The district where Santu lives is called Valmiki Basti, which literally means “scavengers’ colony.” Some 10 years ago, I was shooting a sketch for which we needed someone to bash up. That’s when Manish landed up on the set. He was thrilled: *“I will get beaten up at least 10 times today”*. Afterwards, I invited him to join our theatre group. That same day, he quit his job - he was 21, working as a salesman for mosquito repellents in local



shops - and started doing street plays with us. While working together, we began imagining what our friendship might have looked like if we'd met at 12. I believe most of life's inciting moments happen around that age. That's why I only make children's films - whenever I want to tell a story, I always go back to that age.

That class status is sometimes exploited in pretty humiliating ways.

Punjabi: When Santu says that Fiza should be sent back to Pakistan, he is alluding to a common accusation levelled at Muslims. "I'll ask someone to get you dropped off in Pakistan." She fires back by teasing his lisp. Santu struggles with the 'r' and 's,' which is why he calls her "Fida"; in some scenes, this leads to a funny, but hard-to-translate, mix-up.

Those subtleties can be hard to grasp, especially for a Western audience. Can you live with the idea that not everyone will catch every detail and will just take what they can from the story?

Punjabi: That's exactly how I wanted it. Four of us worked on the script, each with very different mindsets and backgrounds - from quite conservative to very left-leaning. We argued constantly about every detail, which



sometimes turned into real fights. Big fights! But we were making the film first and foremost for an Indian audience; we never imagined it traveling abroad. We wanted to capture those funny nuances that resonate among Indian audiences. I was inspired by the Hindi director Rajkumar Hirani and his film 3 IDIOTS. I love his sense of humour and always wanted to make a comical film myself. TO FETCH A PAIL OF WATER tells a political story, yet it is a child-driven film introducing a wide mix of characters, young and old, and we want everyone in the audience to relate to at least one of them.

Even to a thumbsucking politician or a drunken old lady?

Punjabi: Someone in my family sucked his thumb until he was 30! That was before I'd even heard of the Freudian idea of infantile regression. The character of Bebo is a common archetype in Indian cinema, and I hope people see something in her - an old woman who was once an idealist, but turned to drinking when she started to feel redundant.

Your three main characters describe themselves as "garbage, gutter, and mosquito". How would you qualify?

Punjabi: I'm gutter, definitely, and Manish would be garbage. That analogy came from the young actors. Raj Kumar (playing Santu) described the gutter and sewer as the main water

sources in his neighbourhood.

Who was the driving force among those young actors?

Punjabi: Raj, for sure! Until he was six, he worked as a rag picker on the streets of Delhi. He lived on the streets with his father, collecting plastic bottles and recyclable waste. At six, his dad placed him in an orphanage. One night, when he was five, his father told him to guard their bag of collected items while they slept. The bag was stolen, and his father gave him a beating. After that, he never lost anything again. That made him the best continuity supervisor I've ever had; he remembered every detail! During the writing process, we learned to see the world through Raj's eyes; he showed us the streets he used to live on. He now wants to become an archaeologist; it reminds him of his rag-picking days, sifting through rubbish for something valuable.

How did the girl Fiza fit in?

Punjabi: Zoie Aggarwal Ahmed joined at the last minute. Our first actress couldn't bowl well enough for the cricket scenes, so Zoie trained for a month until she could. Fiza's father wonders in despair when his daughter will start behaving properly. In a Mus-





lim neighbourhood, girls with a hijab are not expected to be playing cricket with Hindu boys. The kids live barely 300 metres apart, but in these different communities, completely different rules and customs apply.

Still, there's this scene in which the boys walk through the neighbourhood, and everything feels threatening. Five minutes later, they walk the same street with Fiza, and suddenly, nothing seems scary anymore - they already feel at home.

Punjabi: As kids, we were told not to enter the Muslim neighbourhood, because of the people, and because of the meat shops, which we didn't have in the Hindu area. It felt dangerous,

and we were scared off by stories about bloodshed and slaughter.

Could this film only be set in Delhi?

Punjabi: Not at all; this story could take place anywhere in India, in cities or rural areas. Problems with water supply and class divisions are part of everyday life, and audiences everywhere in India can relate to them.

There's a vibrancy to Delhi's streets that must have been hard to capture.

Punjabi: Delhi is chaos, 24/7. We often had to move locations, once because someone had been murdered. On the day we planned to shoot Bebo's death, someone actually died in

that area; that felt like a bad omen. Sometimes people threw stones at us for blocking the street. And people - drunk or high - would wander onto the set looking for trouble, even during the day. Still, we shot for 33 days and never had to cancel a single day.

A sheer mix of vehicles is typical of Indian cities: cars, scooters, motor rickshaws, tankers... Which was the hardest to handle?

Punjabi: The motor rickshaw. We had to shoot the rickshaw scene in the streets, with three vehicles racing through narrow alleys. These rickshaws are full of handmade electrical stuff that can malfunction at any moment. Even navigating a water tanker through the streets, blocking traffic, was tricky.

A political layer is added through an encounter with the ambitious politician, Rani Devi.

Punjabi: Her character is inspired by Citizen Kane; we wanted Rani Devi to have her own "Rosebud moment," taking us back to when she was still a true idealist. No one is evil by default; it often comes down to how life unfolds. People forget where they started, and then, at some point, they face a choice: carry on, or make a clean break. If every politician had their

own Rosebud moment, things might just change.

Indian films often feature songs, more or less prominently. What about your film?

Punjabi: Everyone told me that including songs would alienate Western audiences. But I was stubborn: I wanted songs! It's the cinema I grew up with, and the kind I want to make. In general, I went for local Rajasthani folk music.

What would be your ultimate ambition with TO FETCH A PAIL OF WATER?

Punjabi: To foster more acceptance between people of different beliefs. That's why I want every child - at least in my country - to see it. These ideas need to take root early. The Rosebud moment comes for everyone, but children can learn they have a choice in how they respond to it and who they become. Adults, however, are often too resigned and cynical to see that.

-
Gert Hermans

Face to face, no stage, no distance

Report by a Generation Badge-holder at the Berlinale

The Berlinale's Generation section has long championed film for young audiences. Last year, they upgraded their relationship with their audience again: treating young people not merely as spectators, but as full participants in the world of film. They introduced the Generation Badge, an accreditation, officially and only for holders aged 14-25. It grants access to screenings and events across the Generation sections, plus carefully selected films from across the whole Berlinale. kino.for you, the DOXS RUHR-Young Curators Network, was among eight projects invited to take part. One of our participants reports from the inside.

Describing the badge simply as a ticket would miss what makes it so meaningful. It is better understood as an entry point into a network of encounters, conversations, and professional relationships that many young people interested in film rarely have access to. For many participants, it was the

first time meeting peers from different countries who share a comparable enthusiasm for cinema.

This year's badge edition began before the festival itself, with a kick-off event at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt. The gathering brought badge participants together in advance: a chance to put faces to names, meet people behind the accompanying programme, and arrive at the festival with at least some sense of orientation.

A wider ecosystem

That evening was an opportunity for the partner initiatives to introduce themselves. Each had its own slot in the fringe programme over the following days, offering workshops, panels, and informal encounters. For participants, it was an accessible way in, not just to the festival, but to a wider ecosystem of people working in and around film for young audiences.



kino.for you got to host a workshop, together with the initiative *Drehs Um*, around the theme of talking about documentaries and the realities that surround them. The morning began with a speed dating session to break the ice, followed by two films curated and introduced by young curators, and rounded off with a conversation with the director of one of the films. It was a genuinely good morning and the connections it sparked stretched well beyond it, into the rest of the festival week.

Beanbag seating

The HKW is the centre of gravity for

all badge holders. It is the main hub for the Generation section, but for the young badge holders, it is also a place to land. There is a lounge area with beanbag seating where badge holders can decompress between screenings, meet fellow participants, or simply sit with what they have just seen.

Not only the partner initiatives but also the Generation team itself programmed this space. One evening brought a lively talk on how to start a film club, where a lovely group came together to discuss what it takes, and who you want to talk about film with in the first place. Another day, the





lounge transformed into a roundtable. Filmmakers and people associated with films from the Generation programme joined and told us about the work in different departments, including camera, sound, editing, animation, and production design. Face to face, no stage, no distance.

For many badge holders, this was a highlight. Where Q&As often place the director alone at the front, here, there was room for the quieter parts of filmmaking to speak. It felt like a genuine peek behind the curtain. The people in the room who make films

for young audiences sat across from the young audiences themselves. Something valuable passed between them, in both directions.

Performing enthusiasm

Beyond the Generation programme itself, the curated recommendations into other festival sections and the glimpses into the Berlinale Talents programme were well received. As a young audience member, the badge made you feel genuinely seen, not as a guest to be managed, but as someone the festival was actually speaking to. A way of engaging with film seriously, at your own pace, guided by your own interests.

The programme as a whole is offered, not imposed. Participants can engage as much or as little as suits them. Nobody is required to attend, to perform enthusiasm, or to account for how they spend their time. The result is a space full of people who are there because they want to be – and that makes all the difference. That openness is not accidental. It is the point.

50% pizza discount

The closing event brought participants back together to give feedback.

What emerged was a picture of just how differently people had used their ten days. Some had worked their way through every short film programme; others had spent most of their time in workshops and panels; a few were refreshingly honest that the highlight had been the 50% pizza discount at the HKW restaurant. All of it, somehow, felt right. The badge made space for all those individual ways of experiencing the festival as a young guest. No single correct way to use it. Just an open door, and whatever you choose to walk through.

The films themselves should not get lost in all of this. One of kino.for you's young curators put it simply: "You got to watch first-class films that made you think." And the Generation programme gave us exactly the space to do that.

The Generation Badge is still new. Its shape is still being found. But the instinct behind it that young people belong inside film culture is exactly right. The Generation Badge positions young people not as future industry professionals who must 'earn' their way in, but as legitimate voices who belong in these conversations from this moment on. For initiatives like kino.for you, that alignment with our



own commitments is not incidental. It is precisely why we said yes.

–
Jamie Karasch
 (kino.for you | DOXS RUHR)

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Feature, North Macedonia, Serbia, Slovenia, 2026

Directed by Kosara Mitic

Prod.: Black Cat Prod., December, Art & Popcorn

World Sales: Totem Films

www.totem-films.com

Alice Dance, Dance, Dance

Documentary, France, 2025

Directed by Thibaut Ras

Prod. & World Sales: Futur Antérieur Prod.

contact@futanterieurprod.com

www.futanterieurprod.com

Barry and Me

Feature, Switzerland, Germany, 2026

Directed by Markus Welter

Prod.: Atlantis Pictures, MMC Zodiac, SRF, ...

World Sales: The Playmaker

Phone: ++49-89-38-09-12-88

worldsales@playmaker.de

www.playmaker.de;

www.meinfreundbarry.ch



Bert Ruins Everything

Feature, Sweden, 2026

Directed by Manuel Concha

Prod.: FLX, SF Studios

World Sales: Reinvent Yellow Sales

info@reinvent.dk

www.reinvent.dk

Curly Burly

Feature, Denmark, 2026

Directed by Jan Rahbek

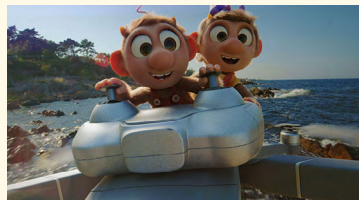
Prod.: Nepenthe Film

World Sales: Sola Media

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

post@sola-media.com

www.sola-media.com



Dante

Animation, Sweden, 2026

Directed by Linda Hambäck

Prod.: Lee Film, Mikrofilm

World Sales: Attraction Distribution

Phone: ++1-514-360-02-52

info@attractiondistribution.ca

www.attractiondistribution.ca

Extraordinary

Feature, Croatia, Slovakia, Slovenija, Latvia, Serbia, 2026

Directed by Marina Andree Skop &

Vanda Raýmanová

Prod.: PomPom Film, Objectif, Senca Studio,...

World Sales: Pluto Film

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

info@plutofilm.de

www.plutofilm.de



A Family

Feature, Netherlands, Belgium, 2026

Directed by Mees Peijnenburg

Production: Juliet Films at Pupkin,

The Reunion Prod., VPRO

World Sales: Paradise City Sales

Phone: ++33-1-53-34-90-33

sales@paradisecity-films.com

www.paradisecity-films.com

The Girls from Above

Feature, Belgium, France, 2025

Directed by Bérangère McNeese

Prod.: Paprika Films, Kwassa Films, Be-side Prod.

World Sales: Be for Films

Phone: ++32-23-84-28-03

info@beforfilms.com

www.beforfilms.com



Grandpa, Let's Go

Feature, Poland, Czech Republic, 2025

Directed by Olga Chajdas

Prod.: Furia Film, Moloko film, Wrocław Feature Film Studio,...

World Sales: IKH Pictures Promotion

Phone: ++48-514-25-44-90

iza@ikh.com.pl

www.ikh.com.pl

If I Die Today

Documentary, Denmark, 2025

Directed by Camilla Arlien

Prod. & World Sales: Northern Souls

Phone: ++45-40-78-80-21

info@northernsouls.dk

www.northernsouls.dk

Koschka

Feature, Germany, 2026

Directed by Bernd Sahling

Prod.: Blinker Filmprod., Friendship



Films, ZDF,...
 World Sales: Blinker Filmprod.
 Phone: ++49-22-15-39-74-60
info@blinkerfilm.de
www.blinkerfilm.de



Kyma
 Feature, France, 2025

Directed by Romain Daudet-Jahan
 Prod.: Moana Films, Parasomnia Prod.
 World Sales: Sony Pictures Releasing France
 Phone: ++33-1-44-40-62-00
www.sonypictures.fr

The Legendaries

Animation, France, Belgium, 2025
 Directed by Guillaume Ivernel
 Prod.: Pan-Européenne (Pan Cinéma)
 World Sales: Goodfellas
 Phone: ++33-6-69-53-65-39
feripret@goodfellas.film
www.goodfellas.film

Manual for Superheroes

Animation, Belgium, Sweden, Norway, 2026

Directed by Patrik Forsberg & Anoo Bhagavan
 Prod.: Stiller Studios, Qvisten Animation
 World Sales: Reinvent Yellow Sales
info@reinvent.dk
www.reinvent.dk



The Mystery Package
 Documentary, Norway, 2026

Directed by Silje Evensmo Jacobsen
 Prod.: A5 Film, Ballad Film
 World Sales: DR Sales
 Phone: ++45-35-20-30-40
drsales@dr.dk
www.drsales.dk



Rashid, the Boy from Sinjar
 Documentary, Belgium, France, 2025

Directed by Jasna Krajcinovic
 Prod.: Clin d'Œil Films, Hélicotronc, Alter Ego Prod.,...
 World Sales: Andana Films
 Phone: ++33-4-75-94-34-67
contact@andanafilms.com
www.andanafilms.com



Sad Girlz
 Feature, Spain, Mexico, France, 2026

Directed by Fernanda Tovar
 Prod.: A Colectivo Colmena, Potenza Prod., Promenades Films,...
 World Sales: Alpha Violet
 Phone: ++33-1-47-97-39-84
info@alphaviolet.com
www.alphaviolet.com

Splish Splash Forever!

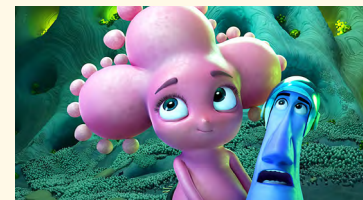
Feature, Switzerland, 2026
 Directed by Natascha Beller
 Prod.: Catpics, Schau., SRF,...
 World Sales: Yellow Affair
 Phone: ++358-50-3-60-03-50
contact@yellowaffair.com
www.yellowaffair.com

Sweetheart
 Feature, Italy, 2025

Directed by Margherita Spampinato
 Prod.: Yagi Media
 World Sales: Fandango
 Phone: ++39-06-85-21-85
fandango@fandango.it
www.fandango.it

Unstoppable
 Animation, Norway, 2026

Directed by Martin Lund
 Prod.: Storm Films
 World Sales: TrustNordisk Int'l Sales
 Phone: ++45-29-74-62-06
info@trustnordisk.com
www.trustnordisk.com



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

Reinhold T. Schöffel

Personal impression by Gert Hermans

Few people manage to project authority while riding a folding bike. Yet the image of Reinhold Schöffel navigating the Berlinale traffic on his trusty foldable bicycle somehow captured him perfectly: determined, pragmatic, and always looking for practical solutions where others mainly saw obstacles. Those qualities undoubtedly served him well during his long tenure as Managing Director (1990–2026) of the Bundesverband Jugend und Film e.V. (BJF), an organisation coordinating the non-theatrical distribution of around 500 titles. Some traces of Reinhold's wilder years clearly remained. There was always a hint of a "nobody tells me what to do" attitude; I remember a minor controversy surrounding the publication of a photograph of the ECFA Board (of which Reinhold was a member from 2010 to 2015) in swimwear.

And there was, above all, his idealism. It still shines through in the countless hours he devotes to maintaining the databases on the ECFA website (*see article p.14*) and in his cherished Films on the Horizon column in every ECFA Journal. After Reinhold handed over part of his tasks for ECFA to me in 2015 — after many years of shaping the ECFA Journal — he rarely interfered, apart from an occasional digital fine-tuning, an area in which he excelled. But every now and then he would ask a question or suggest an idea, always driven by the same concerns: safeguarding the importance of quality films, and reflecting on ECFA's role in the contemporary film landscape. One constant ran through all his contributions to the Journal: never late, always comfortably ahead of deadline! A contemporary of Felix Vanginderhuysen - the two now retiring simultaneously -



Reinhold perhaps cultivated a different international profile, and may therefore not always receive the recognition he deserves. Yet his legacy speaks from the structures and foundations of the ECFA website, and now also from this contribution to the Meet the Mentors series.



THE 'MEET THE MENTORS' Q&A

Reinhold T. Schöffel, BJF, Germany

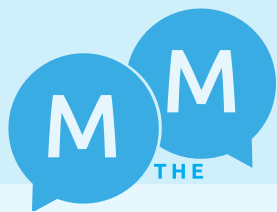
1. You have dedicated a big part of your life to quality children's culture. How did it all start?

Having grown up in a small town in northern Bavaria, close to the borders with the German Democratic Republic and the CSSR, with hardly any traces of cultural life, you have to determine for yourself how you want to spend your time. The young people of my generation in this town founded a youth club, organising concerts, theatrical events, discussions, and, of course, film screenings. A small film festival was founded with a special focus on films from Eastern Europe. The nearby borderlines made us curious to look behind this Iron Curtain, and there, we found a rich film culture with a special concern for ordinary people, including children! [The festival still exists](#) and will celebrate its 50th anniversary in 2027.

2. Who, fictional or real, inspired you the most?

Three persons to mention: Documentary filmmaker Jürgen Böttcher, currently known as the painter Strawalde. His approach to the people he





portrayed in his DEFA films is so much driven by respect and affection. Then there is Wim Wenders with his poetic road movies. And the deeply human stories Aki Kaurismäki tells in his films, making us see through the eyes of his protagonists, have always been a great inspiration for me.

3. How much did your own childhood memory of cinema influence you in your professional work?

Not at all. As a child, I hardly had a chance to see movies; for many years, my family didn't have a TV. So my memories of cinema started as a teenager, screening films by Wenders, Fassbinder, etc., with 16mm-copies in our youth club.

4. What principles guided you in the work you did on a national and international scale?

As a teenager and even more so later, during my studies, I had to learn that many rather poor films sell plenty of

tickets, while many good films hardly find their way onto the screens. And it was exactly those films that invited their audience to think about the lives we are living. My ambition soon became to find such films that can change the world (or at least the mindset of one person) and bring them to an audience. This was the idea; the reality, of course, was more small-scale, but certainly had an impact after all. With our small film festival during the 80's, our group of students managed to build bridges across the Iron Curtain, presenting films from Eastern European Socialist countries in West Germany and engaging filmmakers and audiences in discussions.

Suddenly, the local audience, ordinary people with no cinematic background, met directors who made films whose heroes were ordinary people too, and had problems that more or less everybody could relate to. These artists afterwards did not escape to some exclusive aftershow party but joined the people for a glass of beer at the local pub. When you organise your (film-) cultural event at an eye-to-eye level with your audience, you can awaken interest and gain trust in your programming.

Later, when my professional focus shifted towards films for children and young people, one of my tasks was

to run non-theatrical distribution, with films being screened in youth clubs, schools, community buildings, churches, in small towns or suburbs where people hardly had access to film theatres. Instead of delivering the usual blockbusters, we decided to offer them a different selection of films: mostly European productions, high-quality arthouse films, sometimes with a small theatrical career, but often without theatrical distribution at all. It took a while, but soon the gatekeepers realised that they worked with exclusive content that their audience hadn't seen in any multiplex theatre half a year before, or nowadays, couldn't find on the usual streaming channels. It requires ambition and trust, but in the end, in a small non-commercial context, you can find an audience for these films.

5. What's the secret to your success: personal character, study and travel, hard work, good luck, or simply good genes?

For sure, not everything I did was successful. And what was successful was always the result of a team working together. But I have some ideas about my contributions to this teamwork: First, there are the ideals that I have been following: promoting democracy, freedom, the idea of justice, and





Ariel (by Aki Kaurismäki)

the realisation that the world can be changed. My respect for good films is combined with a hands-on mentality. When I started organising a film festival, I first learned how cinema projection works. In those days of celluloid, the projectionists had a tough job, and to guarantee our audience the best possible quality on screen, I learned how to do it. I remember introducing a film director on stage, and then running to the projection room to start the machine. Until the very end of my professional work, I insisted that we'd all help the technicians until their work was done and their gear was packed, before the aftershow party started. What is the common ground of these memories? It is the respect for other people and their work. Finally, I was always willing

to go the extra mile if needed. There is no film that I have ever distributed that I did not watch myself; no DVD has ever been produced without me checking the master file for perfect quality, etc.

6. What specific impact did you want to create on the lives of your young target audience? What did you want to convey to them through your work?

As I said: Promoting democracy, freedom, the idea of justice, and the realisation that the world can be changed.

7. Working for a big institution, how did you make sure to always keep in touch with the target group and the fieldwork?

For many years, I have worked for BJJ,

which wasn't a big institution. It's a federation of people, screening films for young audiences; thus, we received a lot of feedback on what was or was not appreciated. Besides that, as often as possible, I tried to watch films for children together with a young audience, observing and listening to them to understand how they experienced the movie. At festivals, we see children enjoying a movie in itself, but when the same film enters a local theatre, it often doesn't get the attention it deserves.

8. Some say that what's national is also international. Do you agree?

No, some things are different in every country, others are the same or similar. Being different allows us to learn from each other.

9. Can you name a few things on your bucket list and how you plan to accomplish them?

I was lucky to have achieved most of my goals in my professional life. Now I am free to think about new plans, without a bucket list.

10. How do you wish to be remembered?

Are you already preparing my funeral speech? As far as I can see, it's still too early to think about that.

Workshop Warehouse 2027

Open Call for Workshop Organisers

Are you enthusiastic about shaping the future of film education for children through creative and innovative workshops? Do you have a distinctive, hands-on project that can inspire cultural professionals? If so, we invite you to become part of Workshop Warehouse 2027, organised by ECFA, in collaboration with Cineteca di Bologna and the European Children's Film Festival Network "Screen the Future" (supported by Creative Europe MEDIA).

Workshop Warehouse is a dynamic exchange platform bringing together educators, filmmakers, artists, and creatives, hosted bi-annually alongside Il Cinema Ritrovato in Bologna. The two earlier editions were a huge success and left us wanting more. Now's your chance! Check the [ECFA website](#) and sign up via the Open Call.



How Can Film Criticism Grow Up with Its Audience?

Panel discussion, co-hosted by ECFA

Films for young audiences rarely form part of the usual ‘publishing, reviewing, criticism’ chain. For the second year in a row, the Berlinale created the conditions for a discussion on how children’s films could gain stronger representation in critical discourse, held under the title ‘How Can Film Criticism Grow Up with Its Audience?’. In his opening remarks, FIPRESCI President Ahmed Shawky voiced the common concern that younger generations may no longer develop the same passion for film. However, the panel was convinced that this would still happen, but that it is up to us to find the right ways to nurture that passion.

The panel featured:

- Marta Bałaga, moderator and film journalist for Variety and Cineuropa;
- Carmen Gray, freelance film critic, journalist, and programmer collaborating with the Berlinale’s Generation section;
- Axel Timo Purr, editor of the online film magazine artechock;

- Tobias Krell, former co-programmer of the Munich CineKindl Film Festival and television producer, presenter, and reporter, aka Checker Tobi.

Are children’s films being reviewed and if so, how?

The panel identified several reasons why films for young audiences receive so little attention from critics.

1. Media publishers show little interest.

Carmen Gray: “The only opportunity for me to write about films for young people is when there is some kind of crossover. I can pitch LITTLE TROUBLE GIRLS to my editor as “a coming-of-age film with a wider appeal” or FLOW as “that Latvian animation doing so well at the Oscars”; otherwise, it would be difficult to pitch those titles. Newspapers such as The Guardian tend to isolate coverage of family films into separate sections that focus primarily on family blockbusters, like the new Pixar film. Generally, for any



From left to right: Tobias Krell, Axel Timo Purr, Carmen Gray, Marta Bałaga & Gudrun Sommer

kind of film other than a blockbuster, it’s becoming hard to get commissioned, and that’s certainly true for children’s films.”

Tobias Krell argued that children’s films are still approached with a certain degree of indulgence. “They’re not taken as seriously as other films. This attitude continues throughout a film’s entire lifecycle — from the offices where decisions are made about whether a film gets produced, through the shoot and editing process, all the way to the newsroom.”

2. If films do not reach cinemas, critics cannot cover them (and children’s films don’t get shown in cinemas).

According to Axel Timo Purr, many acclaimed children’s films simply never reach audiences through regular theatrical distribution: “The films I encounter within this children’s film bubble often never make it into cinemas. QUEEN OF NIENDORF was an excellent German film that won awards around the world, but it barely reached the big screen.”

3. Family blockbusters are often re-



viewed uncritically, which means they aren't taken seriously.

Axel Timo Purr: "Artechok writes about young audience films the same way we write about adult films: critical, sometimes very critical! But at press screenings for SCHOOL OF MAGICAL ANIMALS, I hear mainstream media people say: *"I don't have an opinion; if the kids like it, it's fine."* That shows how little these films are taken seriously. They don't want to confront them with a proper critique." According to Tobias Krell, even commercially successful productions rarely receive substantial critical engagement. "The CHECKER TOBI films are basically blockbusters, so we receive a lot of press coverage. Good for us, but I would like our films, as well as other German productions, big or small, to receive more serious critical attention. I want them to be approached in the same way as films for adult audiences."

Carmen Gray: "I often notice a somewhat regressive attitude from editors, where they're like, *"Oh, you're a mother with a child, maybe this would interest you"*. It's usually not the fathers who get asked to write about these films."

Who are we reviewing for - children or parents?

The panel's answer was unanimous: most reviews of children's films are written for parents. As Carmen Gray noted, reviews generally combine two perspectives: "One is: if you're an adult taking your child with you, are you going to be bored to death? And then there's: how do we imagine children are going to respond to this film?"

Could children write reviews for each other instead? According to Axel Timo Purr, that doesn't work: "We tried it at artechock, but no child ever clicked on these articles." Still, Tobias Krell argued that such initiatives remain valuable: "Berlinale Generation does it, and we do it at Cinekindle. During the festival, a bunch of children are taught by professionals how to write about cinema. They write for other kids, and hopefully they're being read." But the obsession with clicks threatens to stifle things. Carmen Gray: "Now that everything is online and attention is monetised, editors will favour the more sensational or attention-grabbing reviews. If children's reviews don't get clicks, that quickly becomes a capitalist problem."

Does film quality matter when claiming space in the media?



LITTLE TROUBLE GIRLS

Tobias Krell highlighted a striking contradiction: some of the most commercially successful German films remain largely absent from critical discourse. "Two years ago, THE THREE QUESTION MARKS was the most attended European film in Germany. It's a children's IP, and yet it became the country's biggest box-office success, with millions of admissions." For Axel Timo Purr, however, popularity alone is not enough: "We should do better. In the US, directors like Steven Spielberg and Martin Scorsese made children's films that were both artistically strong and

major blockbusters. If kids only get to watch formats like SCHOOL OF MAGICAL ANIMALS, they will get distorted. They will no longer be able to watch any other type of cinema. If we don't start forcing kids to watch different formats, then it will end badly."

Is there a marketing issue?

The stigma surrounding children's cinema surfaced in Marta Bałaga's conversation with director Frederike Migom, who was worried that her EVERYONE'S SORRY NOWADAYS's





EVERYONE_S SORRY NOWADAYS

selection for the Berlinale's Generation programme might lead audiences to label her film as "just for children". That stigma was one reason why, in 2007, the Berlinale renamed its Children's Film Festival section "Generation". Carmen Gray: "Because these films are there to open things up, to encourage curiosity and engagement with the world. Children's cinema is sometimes associated with cocooning away in a little, sanitised 'happy ending' universe, but that's not how we see cinema." Generation now presents itself as "a programme of contemporary films exploring the lives and worlds of children and teenagers". Still, Marta Bałaga argued that there is also value in events that openly embrace the "for kids" label.

With CineKindl, Tobias Krell sought to follow the Berlinale model: "What Generation does brilliantly is programme films for young audiences as part of the main Berlinale, so that film lovers and professionals regard them in the same way as films from Panorama or other sections. That recognition is something so valuable. It also gives children a gateway into the festival and encourages them to discover films beyond family blockbusters. At Cinekindl, we too are trying to close the gap between the children's audience and the other festival sections." But Axel Timo Purr returned to his same underlying concern: those films still don't reach cinemas. "Writing about Generation means writing



FLOW

for 'the bubble'. Films don't exist if nobody writes or talks about them. So how do we break out of that bubble and bring these beautiful films to audiences?"

Should journalists find new formats to write about films for young audiences?

Carmen Gray: "Nowadays, on social media and Letterboxd, young people are writing about films directly, without editors or traditional newspaper formats standing in the way. So probably it's gonna be happening there, in those different mediums and platforms." Axel Timo Purr is more sceptical. In his view, platforms such as Letterboxd are like echo cham-

bers: "The louder you yell into it, the louder you get things back. If you call out with a soft voice, nobody notices. Only celebrity-driven campaigns really cut through. If a child - or I - writes something, nobody listens."

CineKindl, meanwhile, has seen considerable success with its "school workshop" format, in which two festival films are presented in a 45-minute TV show reaching more than 2,000 schoolchildren, partly thanks to the popularity of Checker Tobi. For Tobias Krell, this raises a broader question: "Isn't it about time film became part of arts education at school - and therefore part of the curriculum?"





SCHOOL OF MAGICAL ANIMALS

Questions & remarks from the audience

How should we raise a new generation of film critics that can build a stronger connection with the audience?

Axel Timo Purr noted that aspiring critics avoid writing about children's cinema: "At *artechock*, we work with young students who want to become film critics. When we let them choose films, they never pick children's films. They simply can't imagine anyone wanting to read about them. So we'll have to find new formats - and I don't mean TikTok, because that's useless and terrible."

Carmen Gray: "I disagree! "In my workshops, I prefer exchanging ideas and hearing from young people about how they would approach things. It's about sparking curiosity and giving them tools. As much as I love the written word, culture is becoming more visual, and maybe that's okay. The younger generation will still engage with cinema but in a different form."

A strong plea from Elisabeth Wenk (Golden Sparrow Festival):

"Regarding the critical treatment of family blockbusters: If a film is bad, please say it's bad! These are the only films being covered because the stakes and numbers are so big, but



CHECKER TOBI

sometimes they are simply bad films. Then please, write it! Critics have a responsibility towards audiences. Too often, children's films are described as colourful, fun, full of songs — but that's not enough. We want real opinions about a genuine art form. It's time to move away from the big bad blockbusters and shift the attention to the big, nice blockbusters! We read your articles about small independent cinema, about the director being such an interesting newcomer with a unique perspective, but we never read that about young audience films. Although essentially, it's the same thing: art, reflected on a screen, and I just want to know what's good or

not."

A note from the Arte Urbana Collectif (Bulgaria):

"Festival programmers benefit greatly from online communities. Young parents use TikTok and Instagram, while young people write on Letterboxd and create their own community. Those young cinephiles bring their friends to our festival, and that's great."

A perspective on the role of criticism, by Gudrun Sommer (DOX RUHR Festival):

"I was surprised to hear that you mainly write for the parents. Aren't you also writing for the industry? Young audience cinema needs criticism in order to gain cultural value. Criticism is also a service to filmmakers. It's not only about convincing audiences to go to the cinema; it's also about a discourse that has value in itself, without any other function than just being intellectual. We should be more self-confident in how we discuss, write, and talk about children and youth films."

This panel was co-hosted by ECFA, the Berlin Critics' Week, FIPRESCI and the German Film Critics Association.

Nathaniel H'Limi about MY LIFE IN VERSAILLES

“The Hall of Mirrors is never empty, but now it was”

A good story can be told in many ways, yet it always remains a good story. The story of *MY LIFE IN VERSAILLES* has already been told in a short film, a TV series, and now in a feature-length animated film. One element that the three formats have in common is director Nathaniel H'Limi, who came to present his film at the Film'On Festival.

After her parents' passing, eight-year-old Violet goes to live with her uncle Régis, whom she barely knows. He is a gruff man who works as a maintenance worker at the Palace of Versailles. After a difficult start, the two are getting to understand each other better and better. Against the backdrop of the majestic palace, with an occasional excursion to the streets of Paris, they fight for each other's future and grow ever closer as a family. A family of two!

There's a short film (2019), a TV series (2024), and a feature-length animated film (2025), all titled MY LIFE IN VERSAILLES. How are they

connected?

Nathaniel H'Limi: Nine years ago, we responded to a call for projects, launched by France Télévisions. At the time, most of their young audience's fiction featured little boys as heroes. Now they were looking for a heroine in a contemporary story. As an illustrator and graphic designer, I had never worked in animation before. Screenwriter Clémence Madeleine-Perdrillat had never directed an animated film, and our producer had no prior experience in animation. Three inexperienced people with a shared desire to work on a global story we deeply cared about. For me, drawing stories has always been a dream, and that is what I did for nine years. The result was a short film which went on to win the Jury Award at Annecy, giving the project its international exposure.

How did that help put you on the map?

H'Limi: With festival selections and a small-scale cinema release in France and Belgium. Every time during post-screening discussions, the same



question came up: What happens next? Even France Télévisions mentioned a possible sequel. Recognising the ideal format for young audiences, we suggested making that sequel into a TV series. Doing a series requires strong shoulders: it takes years, and it's super complicated to finance, even if everyone loves your project.

Were you able to maintain the same quality standard as in the short film?

H'Limi: Not entirely. My graphic style may appear simple, but it is entirely handcrafted. The short film was done

with gouache and ink on paper, with all 300 sets drawn by hand. With the money that our producer was able to piece together, we spent five years making the series, which had its life on the small screen. Which felt somewhat frustrating; we believed our story deserved its place on the big screen. We re-edited the 2h20 of footage from the series into a 1h20 feature. Moving away from the series' episodic approach was a challenge; much of the credit for that goes to Clémence. That's the genesis story of these three different formats under the same title. Or even four, if we in-



clude the book adaptation.

How much footage from the original short did you reuse?

H'Limi: All of it! The first 26 minutes of the feature are exactly the short film. Since its release six years ago, our audience has completely renewed itself. Aside from the animation in-crowd, nobody will recognise those 26 minutes as a separate short.

VERSAILLES must have taken up all your time for years!

H'Limi: For Clémence and me, this film marks the end of a nine-year-long period. This is the moment to understand that everything we did made sense. You would be surprised how deeply this story resonates inside us. It carries traces of our personal lives and of everything we went through in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in Paris in 2015.

I hadn't realised those attacks were so present in the short film.

H'Limi: That's where the entire project began! You can sense it from the streetscape: the writing on the walls, the presence of police officers, the Place de la République covered with flowers... Those attacks have marked us all - every adult in France remembers exactly where they were



on November 13, 2015. They were so violent and unfair that people didn't know how to talk about it. That's what made us want to make this film. Today, most children don't even know what a terrorist attack is. Our core message is: things like this shouldn't happen, but they did happen, and we need to acknowledge it.

The feature film adds several layers to the story, particularly dealing with adult issues.

H'Limi: Children suffering from adult problems is a universal thing. Clémence approaches this with humour, while staying close to the painful truth. Régis, for instance, was unable to fulfil certain expectations due to physical limitations, and now finds

himself judged by his parents. It's a situation that resonates in many families. The expectations that parents and children place on one another are exactly why we all go to see psychologists.

What makes Paris feel like Paris in your film?

H'Limi: I'm a real-life drawer. I had never designed a film set before, which honestly made me panic. So I began researching obsessively. The whole film, graphically, draws from that. The grandparents' apartment is inspired by my parents-in-law's home. Régis' house comes from one of the forest rangers' houses in Versailles. For Viollette's run through the city streets, I explored the area around Place de

la République and selected a nearby school and house. I retraced her route on Google Maps and photographed everything. For my drawings, reality is like the bones and muscles that give structure to the human body.

With your attention to correctness, Versailles must have been a challenge!

H'Limi: We were lucky... Versailles is always packed. It's almost impossible to take reference photos among 15,000 visitors. But once production began, COVID-19 hit. The authorities in Versailles reached out to us: the castle is closed to the public; this might be your chance! Experiencing Versailles completely empty was extraordinary, almost unreal. The Hall of Mirrors is never empty, but then it was!

Decorations in Versailles are so overwhelming that ultimately, you simply seem to give up on clear lines.

H'Limi: When I show my drawings to students, they often go like: "Wow, that's so well done." But it's not. If you look closely, you'll see nothing but messy scribbles. Together, they look like something grand, but it's just strokes. Early on, Clémence and I agreed not to strive for perfection.





I often describe our style as ‘realistic, but poorly executed’.

There is a striking scene in which Violette and Régis sit by the fire, burning leaves. From this game of shadows and silhouettes, a new story emerges.

H’Limi: When we presented our storyboard to France Télévisions, they said: “Ah, so this is the obligatory graphic ‘delirium’.” Apparently, in every animated film, the filmmaker at one point wants a graphic delirium, which allows him to enter another universe and go all the way. But we didn’t go all wild; we stayed close to the emotional core of the text, which is very delicate. This is a pivotal moment when Violet and Régis understand what

binds them. The flames were created by hand - I asked for a computer-generated fire, and then redrew it myself to match our graphic language. Creating that scene was one of the most exciting moments of the entire film.

What makes it their perfect moment to connect?

H’Limi: They connect through a shared sense of loss. Violette understands she’s not the only one in mourning. And Régis realises that he doesn’t take care of Violette because he has to, but because he wants to.

French animation seems to be thriving at the moment, with a strong output of shorts and international co-productions.



H’Limi: I’m not a producer; I’m just a modest filmmaker, observing what’s going on around me, rather than being really part of it. From what I observe, wonderful series and films are being made by dedicated production companies, such as MIYU Productions (with whom we began this project), and Sacrebleue. Many schools have developed animation programmes with a growing number of students. The downside is that many people with training in animation cannot find a job; I see young talents struggling to enter the industry. So while the creative energy is very much alive, the economic reality is more fragile.

Is there still room today for a film like MY LIFE IN VERSAILLES?

H’Limi: We’re currently developing a new feature, an adaptation of the book ‘Jean-Chat voit dans le noir’, which I illustrated. Our producer has already warned us that, at the moment, 2D feature animation in France is not the safest investment. So many films are being made, but the financial return is not exactly impressive. Even a remarkable film like CHICKEN FOR LINDA struggled to find an audience. But I’m not an expert. My role is simply to draw stories, and I work as hard as I can to make that work. We may have to fight a bit for our position, but I’m still confident.

– **Gert Hermans**

Film Rating in Poland

The Role of ZEF – Team of Film Educators

Poland still doesn't have an official film rating system. This situation creates confusion and leaves a gap in the broader framework of protecting young audiences. The ZEF – Team of Film Educators, a member of ECFA, is tirelessly working to create a change.

ZEF is a foundation dedicated to identifying the most valuable and engaging films for children and young people. Over the years, its members have developed and successfully implemented their own film evaluation system, providing practical guidance for anyone involved in responsible communication with young audiences - parents, teachers, and caregivers alike. The data regularly published on ZEF's website have become a crucial point of reference, even for the film industry itself. Distributors increasingly rely on these independent assessments in their promotional materials, which demonstrates how such support is needed.

Recognising this demand, ZEF has initiated a nationwide discussion on the

need for an official film rating system. The starting point for this debate was an online publication titled [The Rating Book, available for free download](#). The publication lays out the theoretical foundations for creating and implementing a rating system. It includes comparative analyses of models used in other countries, explores the cultural and educational implications of classification, and proposes a framework tailored to Poland's legal and institutional realities. It also highlights how ratings can strengthen media literacy, support educators and parents, and encourage young audiences to engage more consciously with cinema.

The Rating Book was written by three authors representing different fields of expertise. Katarzyna Krasoń, a professor of social sciences, creativity pedagogue, art therapist and literary scholar, focused on children's perspectives on film, their psychosocial development, and the importance of guided film education. Kamil Minkner, professor at the University of



At the Barrier-Free Forum

Opole with a background in political science, examined the legal aspects, terminology, and practical challenges. Kaja Łuczyńska, PhD in film studies, explored international rating examples and the potential use of modern technologies, including artificial intelligence. The publication is very much a collective effort, drawing on years of experience gathered by ZEF experts, committed to advancing film education in Poland.

The primary goal of The Rating Book

was to spark a nationwide conversation - and it has succeeded! Since the publication, ZEF representatives have participated in numerous industry events. One of the first was Forum Wokół Kina (Cinema Forum), Poland's most important industry gathering for distributors, producers, and cinema operators. In the presentation, ZEF highlighted the practical benefits of a rating system, presenting it as a tool for responsible audience communication and as a way to simplify work





Kaja Łuczyńska

with school groups.

Another important event was Forum Bez Barrier (Barrier-Free Forum), where ZEF joined a panel discussion on film rating. It is particularly encouraging that this topic has become part of the broader movement to improve accessibility in cinema. Poland is currently seeing considerable progress in this area: fully accessible screenings are becoming more common, films are increasingly equipped with sign language interpretation and audio



The Rating Book

description is widely available.

ZEF also took part in the annual Forum Edukacji Filmowej (Film Education Forum), engaging in a multifaceted debate on film classification. The discussion brought together both supporters and skeptics, helping to identify key challenges in developing a Polish rating system. The task ahead is to create a transparent, impartial framework that balances the needs of all stakeholders, encourages open dialogue and is subject to a regular

evaluation. Such a system must be preceded by broad consultations - both public and industry-specific - to ensure it reflects real expectations.

Equally important will be effective promotion, so that the final tool is widely known and accessible. One cannot ignore Poland's historical context. The legacy of censorship during the communist era still shapes public perception. For this reason, it is crucial to clearly distinguish between rating and censorship. A rating system should be understood as a supportive, advisory tool - a trusted source of information - not a mechanism of con-

trol. It is something to recommend and promote, never to impose.

Introducing a national film rating system in Poland will not be easy. ZEF is currently focused on building a coalition of individuals and organisations, ready to support this initiative, while also establishing dialogue with public institutions - essential partners in turning ideas into reality.

If you have suggestions or would like to contribute to this effort, ZEF warmly invites you to get in touch!

Contact: zef.fundacja@gmail.com



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Marija Ratković Vidaković on the Youth Cinema Network

“The technological evolution hasn’t affected the core of our work”



Films For Children = ECFA; Films By Children = YCN (Youth Cinema Network). Some festivals incorporate both segments into their operations, so despite their differing profiles, there are certainly areas of overlap between the two. What can ECFA learn from their experience? We asked Marija Ratković Vidaković. She has been involved since the YCN was founded in 2012. As well as being the administrative manager, she is also one of the network’s spokespersons. In that capacity, she contributed to every issue of the ECFA Journal for many years. Now that this collaboration is coming to an end, we’re giving her the floor once more to talk at length about the workings of the YCN, which celebrates its 15th anniversary next year.

What exactly is the Youth Cinema Network (YCN), in formal terms: in size, scope, geographical reach, etc.?

Marija Ratković Vidaković: It’s an informal network of festivals, film and media educators, and organisations

dedicated to making films with children and young people. Our focus is on practical filmmaking. We have around 50 members. These days, we often see people stepping down from their festival roles but still wanting to stay involved with the network as freelancers. In the early years, we only had a handful of freelancers in YCM, but nowadays they account for 25% of our members. Through the Croatian Four Rivers Festival, I was one of the founding members of YCN, and when I moved to Sweden in 2017, I joined as a freelancer in my capacity as a media teacher. Geographically speaking, most of our members are from Europe, but we also have representatives from the US, South America, and Africa.

Is there an overlap with the classic type of festivals that screen professional productions for children, as we know them in ECFA?

Ratković Vidaković: It is not uncommon for our members to be part of a larger organisation primarily dedicated to professional children’s films,



such as Camera Zizanio being part of the Olympia Festival, provided their programme includes a section dedicated to films made by children themselves.

I remember that around the turn of the century, sending VHS tapes was quite a hassle. How have your methods for collecting and distributing material evolved as a result of technological advances?

Ratković Vidaković: The technological landscape has changed tremendously,

but the major changes already came before 2010. When we started in 2012, Vimeo already existed, we had WeTransfer, and small cameras were quite affordable. Today, thanks to the evolution of mobile phones, filmmaking tools are even more accessible. As a high school student, I sent my films to festivals on VHS and DVD. Nowadays, things have become easier, but this technological evolution hasn’t affected the core of our work; it hasn’t changed our mission.



I had thought, however, that due to the availability of cameras and the changing nature of visual culture, the demand for media education had become ever greater and more important.

Ratković Vidaković: That's true, but our mission isn't so much about media education as it is about raising the profile of young filmmakers' work. Media education is often part of our members' mission, but not of the network itself, which is more about connecting people and distributing content. Our target group is not the young filmmakers themselves, but the adults running festivals and organisations that engage with young people in filmmaking.

Your roots are in Croatia. I recall that there has always been a vibrant scene for young filmmakers in Central Europe and the Balkans.

Ratković Vidaković: Back in the days of Yugoslavia, there were already festivals for films made by children, and that concept still exists in Croatia. We have at least three festivals for young filmmakers! When I arrived in Sweden in 2017, there were very few events for films made by children, ever since the national November Festival decided to focus solely on high school and university students. There are



Filming in Sweden

plenty of film workshops in schools, sometimes as extracurricular activities, but the results are only screened locally. In a country where the tradition of professional children's films is so strong, with BUFF (Malmö) as one of Europe's leading festivals, I found it surprising that not much attention was being given to the distribution of films made by children.

What is the budgetary context in which you operate?

Ratković Vidaković: YCN doesn't receive any funding; we operate solely on membership fees. I tell potential members: You get out of the network as much as you put into it. One of the first things I did when I started

working as a media teacher in Sweden was to set up an international workshop, selecting partners from the list of YCN members. To this day, that international exchange is still going strong. That's the beauty of the network: there are always people you can count on to set up projects together. The most important thing is your connection with the other members.

Within the network, you showcase each other's work. Are there opportunities to show those films beyond the network and present them to a wider audience?

Ratković Vidaković: The winning films in our annual YCN Award, particularly in the oldest age category, offer

rock-solid content that wouldn't look out of place at a professional film festival. During a panel at the BFI in London, I once screened a short film made by Hadley Hillel from the US. Afterwards, I was approached by a distributor. I put her in touch with Hadley, and the film was sold. It does happen sometimes, and I'd be delighted to see it happen on a more professional basis. But we run this informal network only in our spare time, and that imposes certain limitations.

In a piece written to celebrate YCN's 10th anniversary, I came across a quote from you: 'Be brave and tell your story!' Is that your main message to young people?

Ratković Vidaković: I tell my students all the time, every day: Be brave and just tell the story you want to tell!

But in that same text, you identify parents as the main obstacle to following that advice.

Ratković Vidaković: This might have changed a bit over the last few years. Nowadays, parents might have a slightly different view of technology. Creating content has become easier than ever, and the skills you learn in the process can also be useful in other professions. I teach an arts programme focusing on film and a social





sciences programme focusing on media, but most of my students never end up working in the film industry, nor is that their ambition.

You are in a privileged position to observe young people and their stories. What are their main concerns and beliefs today?

Ratković Vidaković: They sometimes think – wrongly! – that they are useless; they often lack self-confidence. Many colleagues in the network see this as a widespread problem. We need to encourage our future generations a bit more to believe in themselves.

Do they still have the same beliefs and motivations that you had as a youngster?

Ratković Vidaković: Not exactly. I grew up in post-war Croatia.

I see...

Ratković Vidaković: I had a Syrian student who recorded a video letter to himself in which he congratulated himself on how far he had come in life, having left behind war violence and dead people in the streets. I've seen images like that too. In his graduation film, that same student stated that the best bed he'd ever slept in was a German prison. *"We'd been walking for months on our way to Sweden, and*

when we finally reached Germany, we ended up in prison. It was awful, but it was also warm and clean, and I'd never slept so well before." His fellow students looked at him in disbelief. We learn from one another by sharing stories, and that gives me so much positive energy.

Is YCN afraid of growing?

Ratković Vidaković: Yes, a little. Although we would like to grow, the organisation needs to retain its informal nature, and we do not have the resources to employ people on a full-time basis. Continuity is crucial; that is why I am no longer the sole coordinator of YCN, but share the position with Antonio Britvar, who is affiliated with the International Youth Media Summit. If one of us leaves, the other ensures continuity. Antonio represents the new generation, and I hope that within a few years, they will be able to take over my role. I see myself remaining a lifelong member of the network, but not at the helm for another 25 years. New people bring fresh insights to the network; that's why stepping aside at some point is a good idea.

If you were given an unlimited budget to organise one major event with YCN, what would it look like?



Antonio and Marija at the November Festival

Ratković Vidaković: I would invite all the filmmakers nominated for the YCN Award for a few days and organise a grand ceremony in true Oscars-style. That way, we could bring together the very "best of the best", which would be hugely enriching, not so much for the network but above all for them.

And then you could take to the stage to host the show.

Ratković Vidaković: Not me. I can't really see that happening.

–
Gert Hermans

Daphne Lucker on FLAME

“A distorted view of love and how to be loved”

Olivia (15) has a passionate but destructive relationship with her mother. After another fight, she's taken out of her home and put into a crisis centre, where she meets new girls and learns to question the bond she has with her mother. That forces her to make choices. Watching *FLAME* can be painful at times, from the physical pain in the scenes where Olivia mutilates herself to the bitter aftertaste of the scene in which she has to pretend to be her mother's younger sister to improve the latter's chances on the dating scene. But the Youth Jury at Film'On gritted their teeth and awarded Daphne Lucker's Dutch feature film their prize.

Can too much love harm a person?

Daphne Lucker: It depends on who that love is for—yourself or someone else. Do I give love simply to prove that I'm a noble person? Does Selma put herself first, or her daughter?

Who can teach you to give love in a healthy way?

Lucker: Your parents! But unfortu-

nately, that's not always the case. I believe most mothers love their children as much as they possibly can, but not everyone succeeds in doing so. Sometimes illness plays a role, or they've learned the wrong patterns from their own parents and end up trapped in a cycle of violence. To the outside world, they keep up appearances—in Selma's case, all the love she shows her daughter is just a performance.

Much of the dialogue in the film consists of people talking more to themselves than to others. Even though there is a lot of shouting, people rarely listen. What was that like for the actors?

Lucker: It all came quite naturally through improvisation. The girls in the shelter home were constantly chattering and shouting. Most of them have been through difficult family situations themselves. We talked about their lives and added personal elements to their characters, so they were largely playing versions of themselves. After the improvisations, we



discussed which elements worked and how to incorporate them into the dialogue.

Is the line between parents and children becoming more blurred in our modern age?

Lucker: Your relationship with your parents changes when puberty hits. You start to feel more mature. I remember that from my own teenage years (which aren't that long ago), and so does scriptwriter Rosita Wolkers, who based her story largely on her own memories. Selma treats Olivia more like a friend than a daughter.

That can seem cool—Olivia's friends think she has the coolest mum ever. But Olivia knows better: it's not fun when your mum shows up at a parent-teacher meeting, gets drunk, and starts flirting with the teacher. That's totally not cool. When her mum goes on a date, Olivia even has to pretend to be her sister. Her mum constantly rubs it in how much she wants this guy, pushing all the wrong buttons.

It isn't a film about sexuality, but sexuality is often part of the arena in which the story unfolds.

Lucker: It's also part of the relation-





ship between Olivia and her mother. That's what happens when you treat your daughter like a friend. Adults talk about sex with their friends, and Selma has similar conversations with her daughter. Some scenes have a clear sexual undertone, but that sexuality is rarely addressed healthily.

You can brag about sex, lie about it, use it to manipulate people...

Lucker: We visited the crisis shelter where screenwriter Rosita Wolkers had once lived, and the situation there was quite troubling. Many of the girls had been involved with "loverboys."

That gives you a completely different perspective on relationships and sexuality—on how you relate to your body, and on what love really means. Everyone in the film has a distorted view of love and how to be loved.

Some scenes must have been physically discomfoting for the actors.

Lucker: We had an excellent intimacy coach, who approached things from a purely technical perspective, never as something tied to the girls' personal experiences. For example, for a scene in which Olivia has to climax, we sat in a circle and discussed how

to approach that on camera. We all had to make loud noises, like a lion or a seagull, and breathe as if we were extremely hot or cold. Sophie Lindner (Olivia) could then choose for herself what felt right for her. It was awkward for all of us, but any sexual connotations were stripped away.

A constant tension between attraction and repulsion marks Olivia's relationship with her mother.

Lucker: During check-in sessions, Sophie and Thekla Reuten (Selma) discussed with the coach about their boundaries. Thekla is a wonderful ac-

tress, and her warm motherly feelings towards Sophie made it great fun to work with them. They felt very much at ease with one another. That was a condition for the actress playing Selma: she had to be kind and supportive to help Sophie feel safe in her role.

Did Sophie have any background as a dancer?

Lucker: Not at all. In the film, Olivia expresses her emotions through contemporary dance, sometimes exploring the entire room with her body. Sophie danced a little as a child,





but she hadn't done anything like this since. Her dancing isn't about perfection; it's about telling a story through the body, and she appears to be very good at that. The way she explores the room is like exploring her inner self; her gestures grow larger throughout the film, as if she's breaking free and gaining autonomy. By the end, you may still have questions about her future, but you sense that she's strong enough to make her own decisions.

She's constantly searching for pain. Why is that?

Lucker: During our research and casting process, we were struck by how

many of the girls we met used self-harm as a way of coping. We decided to incorporate that into the story. It's just as much a physical thing as the dance sequences.

Did you have a special budget for all those lighters?

Lucker: At first, the flames symbolise the pain she inflicts on herself, but they also represent an inner fire that drives her, which ties into the film's title. The girls appreciated that we took their experiences with self-harm seriously and portrayed them with care. We show that there are ways to overcome those urges. When it comes to expressing emotions that Olivia can't

put into words, she channels them through dance.

Why did it sometimes feel like I was watching a documentary, even though it isn't one?

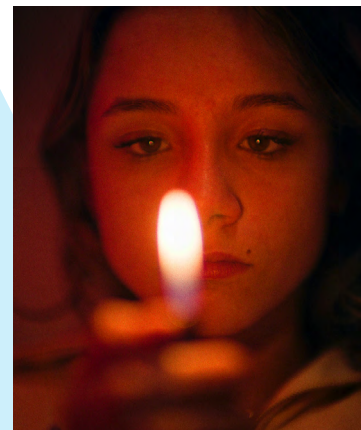
Lucker: The girls in the shelter house are somehow playing versions of themselves. Their raw, authentic presence is what makes it feel so real. It's also in the camerawork. The images are often bright, with girls wearing colourful outfits in a stylized setting, but the camera follows Olivia in a loose, almost documentary-like way.

You can even see it in her skin, which shifts from pale to a rosy glow.

Lucker: That's mostly done in the colour grading. We used very little makeup because we wanted the girls to look as natural as possible, with all the small imperfections and pimples that come with puberty.

All we want for Olivia is for her to find peace of mind. What does she need to grow into a more balanced individual?

Lucker: Her mother constantly lets everyone down, and Olivia doesn't want to be let down again. Other people help her see that she doesn't have to accept that; she can stand up for herself, even against her mother. We



often feel a sense of loyalty towards our parents; we grow up believing that parents are always right. That's why someone else needs to tell you that things just aren't your fault. Mum always claims it's Olivia's fault, and so many girls in crisis centres believe the same thing. We should not blame the victims, but make it clear that it is not their fault.

– Gert Hermans



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European Children's Film Association

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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ECFA

European Children's Film Association

Phone: +32 (0)475 55 02 97

Email: mail@ecfaweb.org

Website: www.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, Xiaojuan Zhou, Stephy Maes, Marjolijn Prins, Monica Wahi, Abhay Punjabi, Jamie Karasch, Kaja Łuczyńska, Alessandro Stevanon, Marija Ratković Vidaković.

Proofreading: Adam Graham

Design: Stefan Köneke

ECFA website: Udo Lange