

Podcast “Filming in Portugal. See the big picture”

Transcription of the episode 7 with Marcel Jean

[00:00:14 Martin Dale]: Well, I'd like to welcome everyone for this episode of our podcast “Filming in Portugal. See the big picture”. And today we're delighted to have as our guest Marcel Jean, who is the artistic director of the Annecy Animation Festival since 2012 and is also executive director of the Cinémathèque Québécoise since 2015. So that means he's based essentially between Canada and France.

Thank you very much for Marcel to be here. And perhaps we could kick off just talking about some of the recent trends that you're perceiving in animation. And as I understand, it's an increasingly difficult job because there are so many new productions and increasingly difficult and exciting work, I imagine, with so many different new trends going on.

I think also Portugal is given a special focus next year. So perhaps you could give us an overall of what are some of the key trends that you're seeing going on and why Portugal was chosen for next year?

[00:01:20 Marcel Jean]: Basically, there is an incredible evolution in the animation world. And what I can say, just to set up the things, is that when I was appointed in 2012 as the artistic director of Annecy [Festival], there was about 7.000 delegates from all around the world every year at the festival. In 2023 there was over than 15.000 delegates. So, it tells you the level of development of the industry and also the speed of this development, because it's just 11 years and it more than doubled the number of people who are coming to Annecy every year.

So, the first question we should ask to ourselves is why do we have that kind of growth at the festival? And I think it reflects some changes in the industry. First, there is a very important development of the industry in emerging countries, in different parts of the world who were not into animation 20 years ago, who now are important players in the world of animation. And it's largely because of the technical evolution. It's less expensive than it was, and you have, because of the computers, an incredible autonomy now in doing animation. That was not the case a few decades ago. At that time, you needed important technical equipment. And you also need a lot of time to do animation and sometimes very important teams to work with you. Now there are a lot of young animators who work by themselves, just with their computers, who are able to do, at the same time, images and sound. So, this is probably the most important thing that happened recently.

[00:03:44 Martin]: And you talk about the doubling of the number of people going to the festival. I think also the industry is increasing, it's not just sort of participants at a personal interest, there's also an increasing number of sales agents, distributors, streaming platforms. If you could talk about that... Annecy has become the key hub, not just a festival, but a market and a key center for the industry. Is that right?

[00:04:10 Marcel]: Exactly. One of the key factors in Annecy is the fact that we have this very important market and the festival at the same time, in the same place. It means that, let's say the artistic side of the industry, probably the funniest place in the festival, and the production, the industrial side, is more at the Mifa. But the proximity between the two poles of the event is the key, I think. You can pass from one side to the other side very easily during the event.

And in your question, you've talked about platforms and this is certainly the most important evolution. The fact platforms were developed in the last decade, it clearly was a game changer because there was a very important input of money in the world of animation through the platforms and they opened the market for completely different and new products. When it was the television, you have a very precise format for a series, as an example. You had to do like 24 minutes episodes or something like that. Now there is more flexibility. You will find series with 35 minutes episode or one episode of 35 minutes, another one of 27 minutes and another one of 40 minutes. So, it's a totally different ballgame, I would say, than what we had in the past.

And it is something that we have to deal with. I mean, as an example, when you are a festival programmer and you have to pick the program that will be in what we still call a television competition, but it's not really "classic television" because you have all the platforms now. So, when you have to create a competition... In the past, you can put four or five different 24 minutes' episodes of different series in a competition program. Now, sometimes you have place only for two programs, two episodes, because there is a 40 minute episode and a 36 minute episode of another series. To continue to be relevant, we have to change our own format in the festival.

[00:07:15 Martin]: And also, I think for the platforms, you were talking about some of the trends of the types of animation that are being made. So, 20 years ago, animation was very much concentrated on kids' animation. And obviously now it's for teenagers, for adult audiences. And I think the streaming platforms, again, have been very important for this, creating almost categories within their offer. But if you could talk a bit about that because I think that's another big change.

[00:07:46 Marcel]: Yeah, exactly. It's another very important change because you don't have a schedule in a screening platform. So, you can have more programs for very specific audiences. And it happened that the development of animation for an adult audience or for teenagers was very important in the recent years, especially through the platforms. And there is a kind of vehicle of that in the world of feature animation film. Actually, we're at the time where there is an important production of feature animation film for adults, but there is still a lot of resistance in the movie theaters, because they are not used to program animation for an adult audience. And this idea of animation for kids is still very strong in their head, in their mind. And there is a fight, actually, I think, between the industry, between the production and the diffusion, the theaters and even the press, I would say.

[00:09:07 Martin]: And also, when we're talking about some of the changes, obviously, the biggest animation producer, thinking about kids' animation, both for feature films and TV, was American, was based in Hollywood. Then you've got other big centers like in France and in Japan. But that emergence you were talking about is not just because of the technical capacity with computers or the demand from streaming platforms, but also because animation is such a universal and more easily exported. For instance, language barriers are easier to get over compared to live action fiction. Did you also feel that you're almost at the cutting edge because of this? You're creating a possibility for even more views from all different countries to emerge through animation because it's more a universal language.

[00:10:00 Marcel]: I would say that what you're saying is true, especially for kids, because there is a lot of animation, very exciting and great animation programs, with no dialogues or with less dialogues. So, it's easier to do different versions. We can say that it's a universal language. It's certainly true. I would not say the same for the animation targeting an adult audience, where

you will find it's certainly easier to do a version because you don't have an actor with his own voice on the screen, basically. There is a kind of dichotomy between what appears on the screen and the voice of the actor. But it's certainly a kind of universal language.

And another thing I would like to add is the fact that animation was instrumental in a kind of renewal of the documentary language in the recent years.

[00:11:17 Martin]: I was going to ask you this. That was my next question.

[00:11:22 Marcel]: Great. Because since *cinéma vérité* appears at the end of the 50s, in the middle of the previous century, the documentary language was a little bit stuck in its development. And we noticed that, recently, I would say it's a question of 20 years ago, there was more and more documentaries that include animation sequences or were totally based on animation. We had very great examples recently. I'm thinking of *Flee*, this great film who was the grand prize in Annecy and who was in nomination for three Academy Awards: best documentary film, best foreign language film and best animation film. So, it gives you an idea of all these possibilities. And I'm thinking also of *Waltz with Beshir*, that was very important in this way. And more recently, *Aurora's Sunrise*, this film about the Armenian genocide, which was possible to do only with the means of animation, because the filmmaker was telling a story that happened a century ago, and she didn't have a lot of original pictures or testimony to put on the screen. So, animation was the key for her. And this director, Inna Sahakyan, she's not somebody from the animation world. She's really from the documentary world and she adopts animation as a mean to tell this story, basically.

[00:13:33 Martin]: Some of the examples you gave are documentaries that are almost exclusively animation, but we're also getting many documentaries that have, as you mentioned, small sequences with animation in them, but it's mainly live action with some animation. At Annecy, for example, do you have a special section or a way of valorizing those type of works in which perhaps 90% of the film is live action, but it has some very strong animation inside?

[00:14:01 Marcel]: Yeah, it's a really good question because we don't have in our rules a minimum of animation you should find in a film. So, it's not written somewhere that you must have like 50% animation to be considered as an animation film. We are still in a kind of world of subjectivity. It's the selection committee and myself who have to decide what will appear in the festival program. And it happened in the past that some films were in competition, in the feature film competition with less, I would say, than 20 to 25% of animation in it.

Since 2019, we have two sections for feature films. We have the official competition and we have also the Contrechamp section. And Contrechamp is for more exploratory projects. Sometimes, you will find in the Contrechamp section that kind of documentaries or are also some films that are flirting with the experimental film world and that could be considered for some part animated, but for some other part it's clearly an experimental work with no exact consideration on the techniques. In some part, it's an experimental film and it's not specifically animation. So, these new sections, a section like Contrechamp for the features, and we also have a section called Perspectives, for short films. And another section that I created on my second year, that is Animation Off-Limits. It's also for short films to find the right place in the festival programming, for films that are at the edge of animation or using animation in different perspectives, I would say.

[00:16:22 Martin]: So you talked, Marcel, about some of the facts of the emerging countries, emerging talents. Are there any particular examples of, suddenly some country or region you're hearing or seeing, new voices that have been particularly inspiring for you?

[00:16:44 Marcel]: We noticed very recently that animation was in a very interesting state of development in Africa, as an example. Historically, there was animation in South Africa, and it was through their link with the United Kingdom, for a large part of the development. But more recently we noticed that in different countries like Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Cameroon, Ghana, that there were some films that emerged.

First it was short films that were made by individuals. But more recently we had in selection a feature film from Algeria, another one from Cameroon. So, there is now some little studios, they are still small, but have the capacity of producing a feature animation film. And it's something very new. In South America, historically there was animation in Argentina and in Brazil. They were the two countries. Then Chile arrived in the game a few years ago. And more recently it's Colombia. And we are noticing a very important development in Colombia with a lot of good talent.

And this year we will do a focus on Portuguese animation. Last year, in 2023, it was on Mexican animation, but I can say that in the next years, we will do something with Colombia because we are really noticing that there are exciting things coming from this part of the world. And in the Middle East also, we are noticing that, even if there is a lot of political problems in this part of the world and it's complicated, but in the Middle East, the development of animation is something that we are noticing every year. Within Mexico as a country under the spotlight in 2023. When I was appointed 11 years ago, it was impossible to think of doing something on Mexican animation. There was not enough films. And the development there was very, very fast, partly because of some figures like Guillermo del Toro, who played a role of mentor and who really helped young animators to do their work, but also because of the platforms who realized what was the Latin American market for them. And Mexico is very close to Los Angeles, so very close to the capital of the industry, and it was kind of natural to put energy in the development of the industry there.

[00:20:12 Martin]: That's great. So, if you could talk a bit of why you chose Portugal then, as obviously we're doing this podcast from Portugal. Of the people listening, some of them will be in Portugal, so they'll be interested by this topic. Now we know that Portugal has a kind of niche animation sector. It's not a huge producer, but it had one of the films nominated for the Oscar for animation, the João Gonzalez' *Ice Merchants*. And Portuguese animation has been doing well at Annecy and in other festivals. Perhaps 10 years ago, you wouldn't have chosen Portugal as a focus country, but you are now, so if you could talk a bit about that.

[00:20:58 Marcel]: On a personal side, I was an animation producer 25 years ago. And in 1998, I co-produced *Clandestino*, by Abi Feijó. We worked for two years on this film at that time. And after this experience, I co-produced *Tragic Story with Happy Ending*, Regina Pessoa's second short film. And we received the Annecy Cristal for short film in 2005 with this great film. In fact, at that time, I really noticed that it was the beginning of something in Portugal. But as you said, there was not enough to think about doing an important focus in a festival like Annecy.

But more recently, we realized that every year there is some very good short films that appear. The work of José Miguel Ribeiro, who was already there in the last century. He continued to do very strong things and he did his first feature two or three years ago. And in parallel, we noticed a film like *Ice Merchants* or *Garbage Man*, that is absolutely great, and all the great shorts by

David Doutel and Vasco Sá. So, we noticed that there is a regular short films production of a great quality from Portugal. And more recently, some features arrived. So, we said to ourselves:

“Okay, we are probably at the point where somebody is about to boom in Portugal.”

And I was in touch with some friends who are working in the animation industry in Portugal and I noticed that many people have now project of features. So in the next ten years, with the support of the State of Portugal for the film industry, I really think in Portugal, they have all the elements to become a very important player in the animation world.

And we are proud in Annecy to be the first place where we announce something. Before my time, there was a big retrospective of Korean animation in Annecy. At that time, there were not so many people aware of what was about to happen in Korea. And since then, we notice the importance of the animation of this cinematography. So, we really think that we are at the moment where Portugal will pass to another level as a country of animation.

[00:24:35 Martin]: And since you mentioned, Mexico was the country focus this year, in 2023, Portugal next year, and maybe in the near future Colombia. Obviously, each director, each artist, is unique. But do you feel, looking at this overall sort of Spain, Portugal, and then Latin America, Central America, is there a kind of an Ibero-American sensibility that you can see? Or you just see them, as very much each country is completely distinct from the others? I'm curious to ask you since you mentioned those other examples within that kind of sphere.

[00:25:13 Marcel]: It's a good question because at the beginning of our conversation, you asked me about the fact that animation was a universal language. And it's true. But it's also easier to co-produce animation than to co-produce live action film. Because you're not in the straight representation of reality. And what you are showing, most of the time, is a stylization of the reality of an imaginary world, so it's easier to co-produce.

And we notice that a lot of Brazilian artists, because of the same language, are working with Portuguese filmmakers, that there are strong links. And when we are in Latin America, we notice that some films are co-production between Colombia and Ecuador and a third Latin American country. It's easier to work with Spain and even with other European countries for a Portuguese filmmaker. As I told you by myself, in Canada I co-produced two films and I know some other Canadian producer who also worked with Portuguese filmmakers and a lot of Portuguese shorts were co-produced by French filmmakers and even from Latvian co-producer, for David Doutel and Vasco Sá. They worked with a co-producer for the north of Europe. So, for me, there is certainly some elements of language or elements of some topics that are common and who facilitate the relations between different countries. Yeah.

[00:27:14 Martin]: And just one last question about countries, since Annecy is based in France, and France, I think already 30 years ago, began to have a high level of state support for the animation sector, was definitely seen as a strategic sector. And so, Annecy obviously itself was born in 1960. So, there's a very long-term interest in animation from France also through the state support, including support for co-productions. I think it continues to be a key hub for the global animation industry. Do you feel that's the case? And is there a kind of synergy between that and what you're doing in Annecy in terms of the festival and the market?

[00:27:59 Marcel]: I think Annecy, the festival and the market, is playing an important role in the fact that France is this kind of hub. Because all the filmmakers from all over the world are coming to Annecy and it gives the possibility of French producers to meet these people, to realize when

they have affinity with co-producers and to work with them eventually. And in France, the rule to obtain money... I would say the rules are very generous with filmmakers from all over the world. There is a kind of soft diplomacy with the co-production in French that is very efficient in animation and in live action. You're seeing French co-producers with a lot of very important live action films that came from Asia and in the live action world.

In Portugal, a lot of great Portuguese filmmakers worked with French co-producers, just if we think about Manuel de Oliveira or some others. So, France is a country where there is no mentality of protectionism. I think it's something very positive for the cultural image of France and also very positive for the animation industry in France, because the involvement of French producers with a lot of very great films that achieve a lot of success all around the world is something characteristic to this country.

[00:30:07 Martin]: That's great. And in terms of trends, of what's going on in animation, the last question about the more technical side. If you could talk a bit about things like immersive production, virtual reality, that obviously animation also lends itself almost naturally to some of these developments. And how Annecy has taken that on board and some of the trends... That perhaps in the future, we won't just be watching animation either on the big screen or on our TV screens, but in more immersive environments or with the goggles, that's already going on. If you could talk a bit about that.

[00:30:45 Marcel]: We've created a competitive section for VR in the past years. And I think we really had to do that, because some very great things were happening in this world. But I'm still not sure of what will happen with that. You know, there is no real business model for the VR and the XR products. So, I'm still not sure of what will be the evolution. Because some studios were very strong and active and suddenly decided to stop their work in this world. But some other studio arrived and appears. But I still don't know what will be the direction of the future, about that.

I would say technically the most important thing which is happening now is the artificial intelligence. The AI was already a subject in our selection last year. In the animation Off-Limit section, we've put a film that was made in AI in competition. For the jury, it was very challenging to have to decide if this film that was made with AI was the best film of the competition, in comparison to some others. So, in the next year, the AI will be the main subject, I would say.

[00:32:32 Martin]: And what was the title of the film you mentioned that was in competition?

[00:32:37 Marcel]: So last year we had in the Off-Limit competition a film entitled *Algodreams*. The film was made by an Australian filmmaker, Vladimir Todorovitch. And it was very challenging for our jury to have an AI film in the competition. For them it was an important responsibility to decide if a film made with the help of AI was the best film of the competition. At the end of the day, finally they awarded another film, but I can tell you that they had a very passionate discussion around this film.

And I think in the next years we will have to face the very fast development of AI. And AI will be very important in the big industry because they will replace technical steps in the production by AI work, it's very clear. And this is the reason why the unions of workers of the industry are so worried about the evolution of AI and the use of AI in the industry.

Last year, we received more than 15 films that were totally generated by AI. Almost all of them didn't have any interest, I would say. But the Vladimir Todorovitch film, *Algodreams*, was quite

strong. Because the guy is a real filmmaker, a few years ago he was awarded by the Off-Limit Award in Annecy. And so, he is somebody who was really able to put a reflection in his work. And his use of AI was not only clever, but it was deep. When you watch this film, you have stuff to think about for long moments after the screening.

[00:34:56 Martin]: Could you explain that just a little bit more? Just because this question of AI is a kind of buzzword at the moment and is considered to be a danger. But in the case of something like animation, I see it as a tool that we could use, but the risk is that the human element becomes reduced because we're using a computerized tool. But when you mentioned that this example of the film had a quite a deep use of AI. Could you explain a bit more what you mean by that?

[00:35:25 Marcel]: Because what was very interesting in his creative process is that he used different types of AI tools and he explained everything in the film. So, through his explanation on the screen, you can understand what was his own role. It was clear to see what was the role of the creator, and what was the role of the machine. And this is something exciting, to be in a position where you ask yourself:

“Okay, ethically, is this a human creation or not? And what does it mean if what I'm looking at is the work of a machine?”

And when you know exactly at which stage the creation was put in the machine and the final product that was generated by the machine... When you can measure the difference between these two things, it's quite interesting at this moment of the history.

[00:36:43 Martin]: That's great. Could you mention when we're talking about the future and the need for constant innovation, the link with students, animation students, at Annecy? So obviously France has some very important animation schools. I think you get people coming from all over the world who are students and that's an important part of the festival. Could you talk a bit about that?

[00:37:06 Marcel]: Students are, I would say, key players in the festival, in Annecy. First, we have largely more than a thousand students who come every year. I think the figures are like three to four thousand students that are coming to Annecy every year and so they are important for the atmosphere of the festival. They are also important because their creations are very free. They are not in the industry mold yet, and they are bringing in the festival themes that are not yet at the center of the interest of the professional industry.

As an example, all these questions about gender identity, they came from the student films. And now we are noticing that in television series or in features or in professional short films, these questions are at the center of the question.

12 years ago, at the beginning of my mission in Annecy, it's through the student animation film that we noticed a lot of women who wanted to talk about their own body and their sexuality. And it was through the student film that we noticed that. Actually, if you are asking me like the three or four most important topics in the industry, I would say the reappropriation of the representation of the feminine body by women filmmaker is something that is very, very important. Every year we have a lot of films centered on this question. It came from the students. So, we have to be aware of what's happening in the schools because it's clearly what we will find in the near future in the professional world.

[00:39:29 Martin]: That was really interesting. I wish you sparked my interest talking about some of the key topics of this question of the female body. Would you like to volunteer any other key topics that you see as kind of themes that are going on in animation, that you feel are particularly strong at the moment?

[00:39:48 Marcel]: You know, it's clear that there is an anxiety about the future. The climate changes is a very, very important topic too. These questions of ecology, of progress, our relation with our planet. It's a very important topic that we will notice in animation for kids, for adults, for teenagers, and in television shows and in short films. So, it's a very, very important topic.

And I would say the migrants. This question of migration is at the core of the preoccupations of the filmmakers, actually. And, you know, I'm a member of the Academy of Motion Pictures and I'm watching the films for best foreign language film. And I think I saw more than 10 films on 50 that were on these questions of migrants. So, in the live action, it's a very important thing. And it's the same in animation. Animation is not so different than live action when we are talking about topics.

[00:41:21 Martin]: That's great. And that brings me on to my last question. As also executive director of the Cinémathèque Québécoise, that's primarily live action... Or is that a very different experience? Or there are synergies between the two?

[00:41:38 Marcel]: No, there are synergies. The Cinémathèque Québécoise is primarily devoted to Canadian and Québécoise cinematography, but we also have a specialty on animation. We are one of the *cinémathèques* all around the world who own the most important collection of animation films. For different reasons. The first one is the importance of the animation industry in Canada since a very long time.

A second reason was our relationship with the Eastern European countries before the fall of the Berlin Wall. At that time, there were a lot of exchanges between national production and institutions in Eastern Europe and Canada, and our proximity with the United States too. There was a World Exhibition in Montreal in 1967. And in this exhibition, in this World Fair, there was a very important exhibition of animation film. And all the American pioneers who were still alive at that time came to Montreal in 1967, and we acquired a lot of prints of American films from the silent era at that time. So, when there is a Blu-ray who is made in the US on Felix the Cat, they are very often used prints that are in our archives. So, it's a very good place, Montreal, to work in the animation world. And so the synergy with Annecy was very easy to create.

[00:43:42 Martin]: That's great. Well, Marcel, that was an extremely fascinating discussion we've been having, talking about key trends both in terms of the subjects, in terms of technology, in terms of the market. I wish you every success in all these endeavors. The next edition of Annecy 2024, what are the dates?

[00:44:02 Marcel]: The festival is in June, so it will be from the 9 to the 15. It's a week and we hope the weather will be great this year.

[00:44:16]: Great, well Marcel, so best of luck with all these projects and thanks ever so much for your time.

[00:44:21 Marcel]: Thank you very much, Martin.