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Emile Who? Before 1st European Animation Emile Awards Ceremony



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Written by Olga Bobrowska Category: [Awards & Prizes \(/index.php/more/awards-prizes/\)](/index.php/more/awards-prizes/)

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Olga Bobrowska critically analyzes the new European Animation Awards nominations, and the status of the awards themselves in the contemporary animation scene production.

The 2017 festival season comes to its end but there is still one more thrill awaiting animation community in Europe. On Friday, December 8th, a newly established European Animation Association calls filmmakers, journalists, film activists and other sort of cinematic travellers to gather in Lille and participate in **European Animation Awards ceremony** (<http://animationawards.eu>).

Controversies related to the quantitative dominance of Western, male directed productions arose immediately after the announcement of the nominees. The statistics, epitomic (and of disadvantage for the organizers) as they are, should be rather treated as a part of a greater, and in my opinion, more exciting problem: do Emile Awards provide any diagnosis of the currents and moods apparent within European animated cinematographies or is the whole Lille gathering doomed to be a prestigious blown egg? In other words, what kind of story about the European animation is EAA trying to tell us, if any?

Since I offer you quite a long reading you may want to jump among the chapters dedicated consequently to the issues of Emile Awards profile, problems of distribution as a crucial weakens of animation industry in Europe and notes on the films nominated in the feature and short subject categories.

Problems of Identity

The EAA ambassadors and animation experts noticed a huge disproportion in the division of the awarded categories with a strong emphasis put on animation as a product of industry (hence 6 for TV/Broadcast Film, 6 for Feature Film, 1 for Commissioned Film), and significance of short film production reduced to necessary minimum (only 3 categories: best short, best student film, best character and background design in short film). It makes sense if Emile Awards would be defined as purely industry celebration, yet best film laurel is given to the director instead of producer. And, what I actually find valuable, the receivers of the awards are exactly the creative, authorial personalities behind the films: animators, designers, composers, etc, sort of "animation working-class", whose contribution is frequently overlooked at the festivals. The organizers' rhetoric also suggests to treat the ceremony in Lille as a celebration of *auteurs* and community ("Throughout Europe in big cities and in small villages, in workshops and attics, in studios and occasionally I'm told, in cow-sheds – the animation community exists. It's a diverse and widely spread family of highly creative people.", we read in an introductory statement).

It all sounds nice, perhaps not much different from what is already been going on in the festival circuit but still promising and to some extent inspiring. But through the comparison of these nice words and regulations priorities, one realizes that it is in fact an industry event. Fair enough, though animation world is rich with markets and pitching sessions, it is clear that these events are alienated from the festivals. Consequently festival-goers do not realize their importance (*vide* separation of MIFA from the Festival in Annecy), and in fact their organizers still look for a proper formula that would ensure an impact on a film production apparatus as a whole (reshaping animation position in relation with live-action and documentary). In this sense here I see the lack of true acknowledgement for producers and distributors, for co-producers and national or regional funds that often efficiently and bravely do the great job for animation across the continent. In both cases (authors or producers in the spotlight), a rewarding financial contribution provided by the organizers of the ceremony could be also considered a significantly differentiating feature.

Emile Awards declaratively refer to the model of **Annie Awards** (<http://www.annieawards.org/>), ASIFA-Hollywood influential animation stronghold for 45 years now. In the course of Annie's history, the organizers of the celebration held in the heart of the consumerist-oriented industry with the major global influence, found a courage to separate production from artistic achievements, and to indicate newly

emerged and interestingly developed forms of animation spectrum by the means of settled categories. And so along the TV and broadcast production, studio and independent production of the features, Annies are dedicated to the producers and authors of VR, home video or installations (the so-called "special production") or for the mastery in directing, character animation, animated effects, editing or writing in film production as well as video games. Such curiosity in variety of animated forms is missing in the framework of the Emiles. Similarly to EAA, Annie Awards don't really expose short subjects but given the historically conditioned essence of the Hollywood phenomenon, it does not seem that striking as in the case of European event.

Nothing Is Coming Soon

No wholesome story of European animation/cinema industry exists. Even a story of EU industry doesn't seem strongly consolidated since markets and production in West, East, South and Scandinavia differ greatly for cultural and geopolitical reasons. If one dares to indicate a common pattern between state cinematographies in Europe, they should probably refer to the ideas of integration and cooperation despite of frequently contradictory agenda of national producers and international audiences who interact with the products of cinematography on local, small markets. It is a shattered story where artistic experiments and imposed ideologies play primal role in the development of the medium. Lack of consideration for such nuances eventually leads to recapitulation of a view that applies to live-action cinema but not necessarily gives justice to animation scene as it appears across the continent. In this view production of shorts is treated as a preparatory stage before actual and prestigious filmmaking activity, i.e. production of the features. In Europe that leaves us with few centres of production located in the countries that have adopted models of global production already long time ago (that would be UK and France in the first place). In this view, the conditions of short subjects and experimental production remain secondary though in fact short subjects are recognizable trademarks of European animation worldwide. Already mentioned inadequate treatment of shorts and features can be easily improved by the Emile Awards organizers, their ambassadors and advisers. But let us focus on the bigger picture and notice a crucial and missing factor that in some parts of Europe slows down development of the industry, while in other regions reduces it to the narrow circles of few studios that are well-established and strongly connected with television. Perhaps the Emiles could be a perfect occasion to put this problem in a spotlight but again, only if the organizers will define the profile and the aim of the whole ceremony. Obviously we're talking here about (lack of) theatrical distribution of animated films.

Last two decades brought an extraordinary change onto film production. The amateur animators easily access technical devices and software, share videos and tips on-line, gather on bigger and smaller events which have emerged on a large scale in a multitude of places, meet the brilliant and successful filmmakers open for mentorship or collaboration. It is a visible democratic change, yet it does not influence industry apparatus that much. Festival circuit is fascinating but also hermetic. In the realm of live-action the festivals support production-distribution chain while the animators face the situation of the festivals being the first and ultimate stage for communication with the audiences. Furthermore, I believe that we can safely assume that quantitatively production of short subjects overgrows production of the features. In the Central and East Europe there is still quite large number of the cinema visitors well-accustomed to the habit of watching short animation before the feature. And the occasional initiatives modelled on European Film Academy's **"SHORT MATTERS!"** (<https://www.europeanfilmacademy.org/Activities.28.0.html>) project (travelling programmes of chosen shorts such as **"Animator on Tour"** (<http://www animator-festival.com/posts/animator-on-tour>) or **"Visegrad Animation Forum New Talents"** (<http://visegradanimation.com/new-talent/>)) are welcomed with interest. Cinema distribution is an essential tool of an empowerment for animation community. It seems though that the European distributors and the cinema operators alike decided for a passive

attitude, treating exclusion of short artistic animations from regular cinema programmes as a sort of dogma, additionally they remain reluctant towards artistic features. If the distributors and cinema owners' doubts about potential financial risks are understandable, it is difficult to comprehend lack of significant lobbying attempts on the side of the producers and filmmakers associations, also animation film activists. There is no easy answer to this problem but the supportive mechanisms will not appear out of nowhere.

Feature Film Category

In 2017 in Poland feature length animations amounted to 11 % of the cinema releases (out of 349 premiers scheduled from January to the end of December), among them 62,5% were European productions or co-productions. Out of this number only 5 can be labelled as artistic animations, and these are exactly films nominated for Emile Awards (*The Red Turtle* - 3 nominations, *My Life as a Zucchini* - 3 nominations, *The Girl Without Hands* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ANbYvxpgx8A>), 2016, dir., character animation Sébastien Laudenbach, soundtrack: Olivier Mellano; 2 nominations for best character animation and soundtrack; *Louise by the Shore* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ni9k7b2aBV0>), 2016, France/Canada, dir. & script: Jean-François Laguionie, 1 nomination for best writing) with an addition of yet another already widely acknowledged one, *Loving Vincent* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bRDSTw6mNwY>) (non-eligible this year for the Emiles since released theatrically after July 31st). The same films have been circulating in European cinemas for a quite time now (mind that Polish distribution chain is not the fastest one), they have already been acknowledged with the highest merits in Annecy, Cannes and some received nominations for Oscars (by the way: similar nominations are going to be considered only day after Lille gathering, at the **European Film Awards** (<https://www.europeanfilmawards.eu/>) ceremony in Berlin).

By example of Polish distribution, clearly we observe the pattern that may lower the chances that the Emiles would refresh the European scene. The selectors have failed to point out "new blood" in the field of feature length production even though they have been "armed" with six different categories (Best Feature Film; Best Writing in a Feature Film Production; Best Storyboard in a Feature Film Production; Best Character Animation in a Feature Film Production; Best Background & Character Design in a Feature Film Production; Best Soundtrack in a Feature Film Production). Instead of diversity we will watch yet another episode of the clash between "Turtle" and "Zucchini", a series followed now only by the most persistent ones as everyone realizes the experts' respect for these titles.

What remains interesting about this battle is the crucial difference between the world outlook the two films manifest and here we return to the subject of the storytelling behind Emile Awards. So what kind of artistic narrative mode should European community cherish? Is it the one fully subjected to the beauty of images and smoothness of the movement but abdicating from the attempts of an in-depth reflection? In *The Red Turtle* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sw7BggqBpTk>) emotional and sensitive perception overwhelm intellectual quality of the film, it is as beautiful as banal and so the creativity is detached from problematic nature of existence. In a sense it is a hypocrisy since the film promises an extreme focus on individual being in relation to the world but in fact it celebrates sentimentality (*vide* "a punch-line" of the final dance), elaborates ecology in a New Age manner, and also reveals certain misogynistic features as the turtle/woman character appears to be inactive and physically dominated by men (2016, dir. Michael Dudok de Wit, France/Belgium/Japan; nominations: Best Feature Film; Best Storyboard: Michael Dudok De Wit; Best Character Animation: Jean-Christophe Lie & Michael Dudok de Wit).

Similar false promises may be found in ***Ethel&Ernest*** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pARzY9HfGBs>) (2016, dir. Roger Mainwood), a surprisingly conservative homage to the work of Raymond Briggs. What is powerful in ***Briggs's graphic novels*** (<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/dec/24/raymond-briggs-interview-the-snowman-ethel-and-ernest>) and worked perfectly in Jimmy Murakami's ***When The Wind Blows*** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QLZgXm4EoHI>) (1986) is the subtle conjunction between ordinary lifetime experience of working-class with the profoundly pessimistic vision of history. This intellectual value, as proved by Murakami, may manifest itself in the visuals balancing between *cartoonish* simplifications and disturbing, morbid realism. Instead, the sweetness of representation in ***Ethel&Ernest*** brings out notion of "nice and somewhat funny 20th century", consequently the film neutralizes all possible fears and conflicts, i.e. dynamics of narrative and visuals. Mainwood's film is nominated for best writing (Raymond Briggs, Roger Mainwood) and best character animation (animation team led by Roger Mainwood and Peter Dodd). If the latter can be sustained, the first one brings out a confusion - despite of the already mentioned personal doubts about certain weaknesses of the film, there is also a question of an assumed equation between writing of original stories and adaptations, especially if the adapted material comes from the close kin of animation, a graphic novel.

On the other side of the stick there is ***My Life as a Zucchini*** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3nRwYVWxjRU>) that employs non-realistic puppet imagery into a modern coming-of-age fairytale (2016, dir. Claude Barras, Switzerland/France; nominations: Best Feature Film; Best Writing: Céline Sciamma, Claude Barras, Morgan Navarro, Germano Zullo; Best Soundtrack: Sophie Hunger). Social pathologies (addictions, sexual abuse, deportations etc) are exposed in front of the children's eyes (first and natural audience of Claude Barras's film) without much of disguise. Sympathetic social service workers function as the protagonist's helpers while the despicable Camille's Aunt stands as the last antagonist on the Zucchini's return to safety. Team of writers (even if it is a superb piece of writing, the "adaptation problem" still upholds though here the adapted material comes from the literary source) demonstrate unique ability of merging the disturbing realism that derives from life experience of many, with the rudiments of children animation genre: narrative universe that is dictated by the logic of play and adventure; influence on action of the agents' of power (adult characters and adult spectators) is reduced to minimum, visuals extend the notion of playfulness and wonder but do not enter poetics of surreal or absurd.

Psiconautas, the Forgotten Children (<https://vimeo.com/139575495>) go beyond that (2015, dir. Alberto Vazquez, Pedro Rivero; nominations: Best Storyboard: Alberto Vasquez, Best Background Design: Giovanna Lopalco, Jose Domingo and character design: Santi Riscos, Roc Espinet, Martin Romero, Hector Zafra, Jose Garnelo, Dalila Rovazzani, Milena Tipaldo, Pablo Parrado). The authors use fairytale narrative strategy to distress and provoke the viewers, awake strong reactions through courageous and heartbreaking storytelling (powerful and deeply saddening happy end) as well as choice of sensual colours, immersive sounds and thrilling editing. The strong means are justified since the authors seem to alarm the viewers to immediately start looking for shelters because the world and its utmost strange inhabitants are inevitably doomed. They leave us with a tiny piece of hope, fragile and totally subjective: humanitarian revolution is a state of mind, the utopia may survive (and maybe blossom one day) only if cultivated on the basis of strong personal attachment and engagement.

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Awards and festivals complement the so-called cinematography apparatus, a perfect and seductive, economic machinery designed for a purpose of a non-stop increase of financial and ideological benefit. Yet apparatus works only if the operators sometimes allow for the excess - be it artistic experiment, technological progress, subversive representation. In a model film industry the festivals and awards ceremonies are supposed to acknowledge the excess, highlight it and above all, explain the audiences its function and significance. Modernized production will be absorbed and reproduced within the industry, then it becomes a new norm. This sketch of a canon-building process obviously can be (and should be) nuanced but in general this is what is happening in **Annecy** (<http://www.annecy.org>), **Zagreb** (<http://www.animafest.hr>), **Stuttgart** (<http://www.itfs.de>), **Brussels** (<http://www.animafestival.be>) or **Espinho** (<http://www.cinanima.pt>). If you enrich this list with the influential festivals taking place in Segovia (**3D Wire** (<https://3dwire.es/>), Spain), Bristol (**Encounters Festival** (<http://encounters-festival.org.uk/>), UK), Fredrikstad (**Fredrikstad Animation Festival** (<http://animationfestival.no/>), Norway), Utrecht (**HAFF** (<http://www.haff.nl>), The Netherlands), Třeboň (**Anifilm** (<http://www.anifilm.cz>), Czech Republic), Ljubljana (**Animateka** (<http://www.animateka.si>), Slovenia), Bucharest (**Anim'est** (<http://www.animest.ro>), Romania), Belgrade (**Balkanima** (<http://www.balkanima.org>), Serbia), Banja Luka (**Banjaluka IAFF** (<http://www.banjalukanima.org>), Bosna and Herzegovina), Žilina (**Fest Anča** (<http://www.festanca.sk>), Slovakia) and Kecskemet (**Kecskemet AFF** (<http://www.kaff.hu>), Hungary) you will cover the map of festivals that may be qualifying for best short and student film to the Emile Awards race (films from the official selection in case of first five events; winners in case of the rest). With an addition of the individual titles suggested by EAA ambassadors, the selection pattern chosen by the Emile Awards committee evidently reproduces already existing manners of recognition in animated Europe. There is obviously a risk of petrification, yet naturally for the industry, the eligibility criteria had to be based in verified sources. Establishing of a new tradition from a scratch requires clear, understandable and acceptable references. On the margins of general under-representation of the non-Western production: it is striking how many festival entities from East and South, events of great quality, uplifting spirit and frequent regional winners and laureates, have been considered by EAA as sort of "trustees".

Short films selectors did not multiply nominations for the same titles, they used Emile Awards occasion to highlight the variety though they were limited only to 3 categories. Poland, Russia, Croatia and Italy found their representatives in this competition and the women filmmakers appeared in a great number on the nominees' lists (even leaving no place for any male in both Best Short and Best Student Film). The chosen 9 stand out for excellency in animation filmmaking, for this reason it is even more regrettable that the only in-depth examined feature of film work is character and background design. In this category we'll find Chintis Lundgren's **Manivald** (<https://vimeo.com/218390739>) (2017, very specific and recognizable drawing style of Lundgren evokes animal characters and bourgeois décor that seem to be perfectly organic together, they possess features of awkwardness, ridiculousness and vulnerability; design: Chintis Lundgren), David Coquard-Dassault's **Peripheria** (<https://vimeo.com/137831801>) (2015, an epic example of the power of the so-called "small cinema" where stray dogs have to locate themselves between claustrophobic, empty interiors of abounded sky-scrapers and the dreadful, desolated open space; design: David Coquard-Dassault), and Christophe Gérard's **Child Dream** (<https://vimeo.com/140501868>) (2016, surreal and distant ocean-like imagery created upon somehow foggy and blurry texture; design: Gilles Cuvelier).

Student works from Film School in Lodz (**Oh Mother!** (<https://vimeo.com/80026091>), 2017, dir. Paulina Ziółkowska), CSC Torino (**Merlot** (<https://vimeo.com/157647016>), 2016, dir. Marta Gennari, Giulia Martinelli) and School-Studio "Shar" in Moscow (**About a Mother** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JpmH8cRImKE>), 2015, dir. Dina Velikovskaya) demonstrate high finesse in composition, framing and colouring. Particularly intriguing is the use of the black-and-white contrasts in films of Ziółkowska and Velikovskaya. This choice enabled them to ground storytelling in the visuals: occurring transformations derive from lines, shapes and shadows; animation and gentle editing aim at integrity of space and

characters, elements of imagery are immersively bounded together and interdependent. Perhaps it could be possible to acknowledge student films which not only present great visual quality but also manifest more engaged inclinations towards social or even political reflection but the award goes for the creative excellence in animation art and the authors behind the three nominated films have proven their ability to conceive and execute outstanding animated visions.

I have no doubts or hesitations regarding the nominees in the Best Short category. They differ technically and aesthetically, exemplify high level of animation practice as well as matured understanding of the cinematic language and heritage, eventually the employed metaphors are not only artistically fascinating but also intellectually telling. Niki Lindroth von Bahr's ***The Burden*** (<https://vimeo.com/200851149>) (2017) comes from Sweden and fits the framework of Scandinavian cinematic traditions of cold realism combined with conviction that cinema mediates anxieties and internalized fears. In order to avoid pretentiousness, Lindroth von Bahr employs a powerful tool: the film is a musical performed by amiable animal puppets. Fish don't need to be speechless, in fact they are the ones who initiate the story that in the beginning echoes The Smiths's anthem of loneliness, "I Know It's Over" ("If you're so very entertaining then why are you on your own tonight? I know... 'cause tonight is just like any other night" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bg7qPYvX8bc>)). The performance moves from the soulless hotel to fast-food, supermarket, corporation office, and following species take the stage for singing and dancing so they can survive the night-shift hours in a universe of European suburbs. The feeling of loneliness is just a part of experience of alienation, mundane and tiredness. The ultimate challenge faced by contemporary working beings is to overcome and forget these feelings. Musical bears strong escapist potential, in a Swedish puppet film the genre is of course intellectually reworked and detached from its Hollywood anaesthetic function but still amuses what makes the burden bearable.

Among the Black Waves (<https://vimeo.com/157752616>) (2016, a second film of Anna Budanova, the author of ***The Wound*** (<https://vimeo.com/63658207>)) and ***Chulyen. A Crow's Tale*** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qtty-aPdSkE>) (2015, dir. Cerise Lopez, Agnès Patron) refer to fascinating cultural myths of Selkies and Trickster, mysterious figures of an ephemeral essence therefore perfect subjects for animated films. To some extent the films seem aesthetically similar for the use of black-and-white graphics and rare inclusion of other colours in highly dramatic moments. The atmosphere of Budanova's drawings is condensed, it's almost possible to sense the thickness of snow or hair, coarseness of wooden utensils and leather coats, slickness of seals' and humans' skin. It is worth to take a look at the excerpts from the author's **"mood book"** (<http://annabudanova.tumblr.com/>), a collage-like diary of visual references Budanova has found inspirational, drawings, photographs and graphic patterns that later on the artist merged together into fully original and autonomous imagery. The legends of Selkies, seal/woman creatures being captured by fishermen, living and loving the human beings but also longing for the return to the sea, are popular among the northern cultures. The most famous story of a Seal Woman enriched with the revenge motive comes from Faeroe Island but Budanova explains (<http://labrasserieeducourt.com/en/sredi-chernih-voin/>) that while working on the film she was fascinated with the numerous appearances of the legend across the globe finding the Selkies in north European, Inuit and Japanese folklore alike.

Selkies lead us to the Trickster figure, a mythical character that embodies no virtues but powerful capacities of transformation, mockery, passionate sexuality and ability to sacrifice. Trickster or Trickster-like creatures emerge in various disguises in all mythical narratives. Authors of ***Chulyen...*** found inspirations in the legends of West-North American Indians hence the Trickster is represented by the Crow. Trickster studied by **Paul Radin** (https://books.google.pl/books/about/The_Trickster_A_Study_In_American_Indian.html?id=v9NvCwAAQBAJ&redir_esc=y) appears as a creature that "has become and remained everything: a god, an animal, a human being, a hero and a jester, the one who denies and confirms, destructor and creator, if we laugh at him, he ridicules us. What is happening to him, it is happening to us." The Crow is

driven by impulses of sexual desire and hunger, it attacks the lonely human in canoe and a seal lying vulnerably in the forest, they integrity explodes upon encountering the Trickster, all the creatures become one compound exposed to never-ending change. The French film can be in fact treated as a piece of poetry instigated by anthropological sensitivity of the authors and expressed with the use of film language. The exquisite animation performed by Lopez and Patron not only sets entangled characters and space in motion but also reproduces daring camera movements such as crane shots, travelling or fast pacing vertical shots.

On Émile and Lotte's Trail

The artistic patrons chosen for the ceremony are Émile Cohl and Lotte Reiniger (lifetime achievement award is named after the German filmmaker), pioneers and experimenters who have passionately pursued possibilities of animation filmmaking and considered this practice as an autonomous medium of expression. They have not restrained from treating their artwork as a product of industry either within studio framework or independent production. And only naturally their artistic and business decisions alike had to be confronted with the political demands of their times. Cohl has spent part of his artistic career between France and United States, while in Nazi Germany Reinger chose a path of an inner emigration but also she travelled a lot around Europe in order to avoid being a part of totalitarian cultural industry. State of flux is a natural one for European animation. Reproduction of already existing ways of acknowledgement and recognition does not appear harmful but not much helpful either. So far the initiative undertaken by the Emile Awards organizers brings out a lot of excitement and numerous hesitations, settled nomination procedures and their results revealed quality of the production, instigated discussions and criticism. This ought be a valuable lesson for the community that declares opening up and outreach increase. Sponsorship and promotion secure prestige and attention but the agenda should be clear, assumptions and aims defined, declarations credible. *Ye shall know them by their fruits* so let's just wait and see whether the EAA strategy relays on self-satisfaction and reproduction of modern canon or courageous stimulation of ferment within it.

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