

# The Third Song on the Record: The 60<sup>th</sup> Annecy International Animation Film Festival

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Animation is, among other things, a balancing act. Situated as it is at the crossroad of commerce and art, the medium straddles several fault-lines, both within the culture industry and within visual culture at large. It is no surprise that Mickaël Marin, industry professional and current helmer of the Annecy film festival, should characterize the event as a *fédérateur*, that is to say as a ‘unifying’ opportunity, an ideal middle ground for the often diverging forces that make up the world of animation.

Born out of a rib of Cannes, and one of the four extant festivals officially supported by ASIFA (the Association Internationale du Film d’Animation), the Annecy festival constitutes, along with its all-important film market, the cardinal event of the year for animators, studios, and industry professionals of all stripes. 2020 was set to have an even greater resonance, as the year would have marked the 60th edition of the festival. The town of Annecy, nested on the idyllic shores of the eponymous lake, in the Haute-Savoie region of south-eastern France, was ready for celebrations. Ceremonies were planned, along with a rich retrospective on African animation. Then, COVID stormed onto the stage.

After it became clear that the pandemic would not have allowed for in-person conviviality, Marin and his team arranged to move the festival online. That such a decision was taken in the first place should already give pause for thought. Cannes, by contrast, remained staunchly opposed to the mere idea of an online transition, with director Thierry Frémaux suggesting to *Variety*’s Elsa Keslassy that such a move would run contrary to the ‘soul and history’ of the *kermesse*. [1][#N1]

Two festivals, both alike in dignity, and yet, when faced with the same world-shattering challenge, two very different attitudes. What gives? Now, on the one hand, Frémaux’s stance is nothing new. Cannes’ defense of the role of theatrical exhibitors, and its simmering conflict with online streaming platforms, is well known among festival-goers and cinephiles. On the other hand, I believe we cannot understand how animation enters this picture unless we widen our critical lenses.

Animation festivals have been, and by and large still are, the only chance animators have to display their work in a cinema theater. Leaving aside all aesthetic considerations, the big screen here functions a marker of prestige, a tangible sign of cultural and artistic legitimacy for a form of cinema in which such legitimacy is often in scarce supply. Ever since Disney’s virtual takeover of the medium in the collective imagination of the West, so-called ‘artists’ animation’ and more experimentally-bent works coexist uneasily with family-friendly blockbusters and televised entertainment aimed at children. Indeed, as Paul Wells and Johnny Hardstaff write in *Re-Imagining Animation*, “as a generally replicable and distributable mass medium or form, animation has largely been deemed undesirable by an art world immured in a very different commercial model.” [2][#N2]

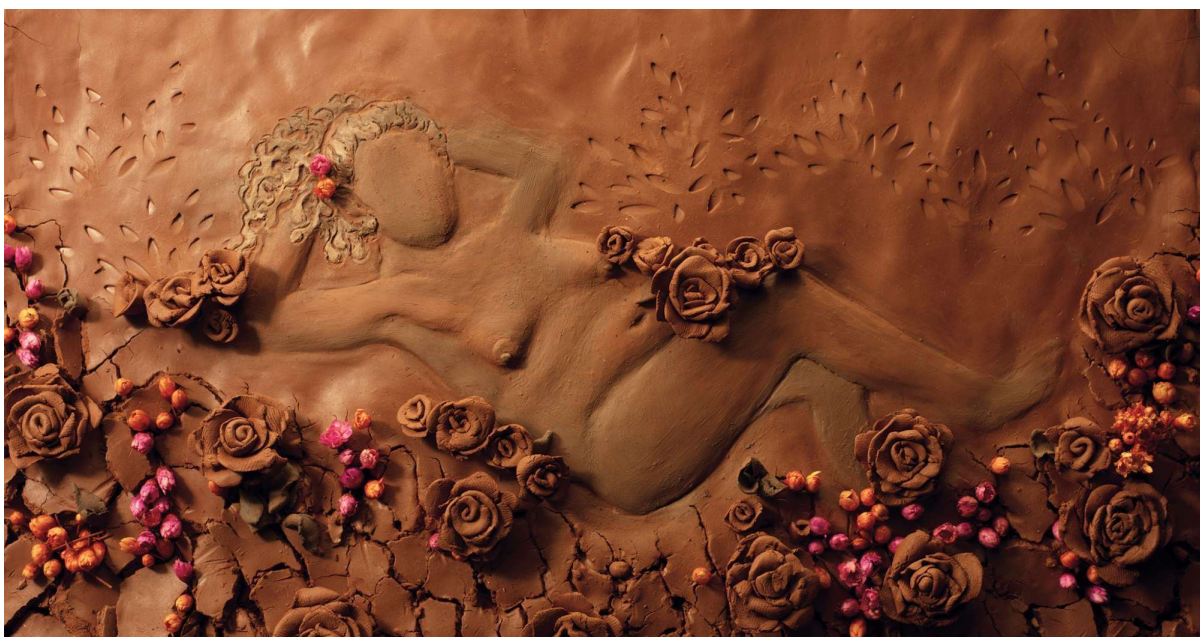
Faced with the need to reconcile the strain between (broadly speaking) art and commerce, then, film festivals like Annecy have long presented themselves as enlightened cartographers of a world which, for all its differences and occasional strife, nonetheless belongs on the same, ideal map. My use of a geographical metaphor, here, is not casual. The idea of animation as a community naturally inclined to

subvert geographical boundaries runs deep in the DNA of Annecy: from the original ASIFA rules, which, to encourage travel, originally mandated that only one animation festival should take place in a given continent each year, to artistic director Marcel Jean describing animation studios as ‘much like the UN’, to emphasize the unique transnational character that marks this industry.

Indeed, elements of this open geography can be detected even in the approach to this year’s remote edition: unlike most of the other festivals that have opted to go online this summer, for example, Annecy has opted to not restrict access to any specific part of the world. My sense, however, is that the online transition has somehow thrown this rhetoric, and the delicate balance it underpinned, off-kilter. For the internet is not just a distribution technology: it is a medium on its own terms, and one largely dominated by the corporate paradigm of content consumption. And as the balance between art and commerce shifts, other, familiar fault-lines begin to emerge.

The entries of the 2020 programme offer of good blueprint of how contemporary animation positions itself in relation to these fault-lines, addressing issues of signification and memory at the root of the medium, taking apart the mechanics of representation and, in the process, drawing new lines in the sand.

A first group of films focuses on the body, which emerges as a contested ground between pre-mediated, and often heavily commodified spectacle, and the unaccountable matter of our lived-through experience. Camila Kater’s *Carne*, a Spanish-Brazilian co-production programmed in the main shorts strand, tackles this tension as it sets out to explore the self-perceptions of women at different stages of life. In each segment of the film, off-screen female voices, anonymous yet clearly individuated, conjure up memories of their bodies. Kater finds a delicate balance between the body as a universal and almost abstract signifier, and the very private recollections described by her narrators. In order to achieve this, *Carne* intentionally avoids direct representation: we never see the flesh of those (heavy, menstruating, trans, ageing) women. Instead, Kater develops a host of visual motifs, from expanding red clouds to evoke the experience of menstruation to broken plates and dolls to suggest patterns of oppression. In so doing, the director disarms the ideological and symbolic conventions burdening the image of the female body (its supposed, consumable transparency) to re-inscribe it as a vanishing object, the tenor of cinematic metaphors in which the visible and invisible blur together.



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Figure 1: Clay animation is used to convey the malleability of the female body in Camila Kater's *Carne* (2019). Produced by Abano Produções and Doctela.

At the opposite end of this approach we find *Beauty Water*, a feature-length South-Korean film presented (in extracts) in the major (and slightly edgier) sidebar of the programme, Contrechamp. Director Kyung Hun Cho uses the obsession with looks and sexual appeal, reportedly growing in South Korea following a demographic shift in the country's workforce, as background for a macabre tale. Borrowing a trope already established in horror web-toons, the film posits the existence of a miraculous ointment capable of re-moulding one's body and features for cosmetic effect. For the unhappy and reclusive heroine of the story, such 'Beauty Water' provides a long-sought opportunity for professional success and social validation—that is, until things take a (rather predictable) turn for the worse. Kyung Hun Cho draws on themes and motifs that have long found space in the horror genre, such as those linked to bodily deformation and monstrous femininity (on this, see the work of Barbara Creed), and applies them to the South-Korean background mentioned above, with reports of discriminatory practices based on physical appearance, and rising numbers of cosmetic surgeries.

From what the extracts allow us to see, Hun Cho shies away from taking any explicit critical stance, and, unlike Kater, chooses to indulge the macabre and morbid elements of the set-up. The visual style is elegant, reminiscent of masters like Kon, but the spectacle feels cheap, if not complicit, perhaps even exploitative. Compare, for contrast, the directorial debut of Canadian designer Thea Hollatz, titled *Hot Flash* and included in the main shorts strand. The film follows an afternoon in the life of a middle-aged weather forecaster dealing with menopause, while the whole town is snowed in. Animator Brett Jubinville translates Hollatz' narrative prompt into a visual language made of neat lines, bi-dimensional digital images and solid colors. The film is subtle in handling the polarity between the body lived and displayed, private and public, without ever slouching into spectacle or complacent fatalism, but, rather, sticking to a tone of sensitive and ironic complicity. Unlike *Carne*, Hollatz's film is frankly narrative, and focalizes on a character. Very much like *Carne*, the stylistic resources of animation are called upon (namely, the mixture of linear minimalism and subdued colors) to allow the spectator the discovery of a less mediated, unexpectedly sincere empathy with the character's embodied experience.

Also linear and neat is the visual landscape of *Empty Places*, by French illustrator Geoffroy De Crécy. The body, here, is conjured up *in absentia*: De Crécy's animation (vaguely retrowave, especially in its color palette) presents static urban scenes, void of animals and people, in which everyday machines (from escalators to turntables) are stuck in perennial motion. The editing adds another element of circularity, as the same scenes appear multiple times, sequentially, first in extreme detail shots and then in increasingly looser shots. The impact is that of a machinic universe, initially obscure, then, as the scenes become more intelligible with each iteration of the sequence, all the more disquieting in its apparent clarity. One can detect echoes of post-humanist critique, perhaps even of new materialism, but if that's the case, the film works *despite* them: as a sign of (bodily) absence.

The semiotic *coté* of De Crécy's short gives me the cue to move on to a second block of films. Serving as a running thread, here, is language. If the body often functions as the dark matter of signification, and thus finds an ideal counterpart in the materials and techniques of animation, it is also the case that the inherently constructivist nature of this medium (literally, its ability to animate and produce meaning out of inert matter) makes it an ideal tool to think about language and constructed meaning more generally.

Two shorts from the main selection offer an example of this focus: *10.000 Ugly Spots*, of Russian director Dimitri Geller (created with his students at Jilin University, in China), and *Freeze Frame*, by the Belgian animator Soetkin Verstegen. The former takes the meeting between two artists of the Chinese canon, Shitao (whose famous painting is alluded to in the title of the film) and the

calligrapher Zhu Da, as an opportunity for a study of shapes and inkblots, somewhere between figurative and abstract. The focus of the film is markedly linguistic, almost a re-discovery of the roots of animated drawing. A similar concept is behind Verstegen's film, in which the scientific origins of animation combine with the technique of the freeze frame. The result is a structuralist *fantasie* of sorts, in which x-rays, mechanical rhythms and sloshy ice unfold alongside a murky soundscape by the Italian sound designer Andrea Martignoni.

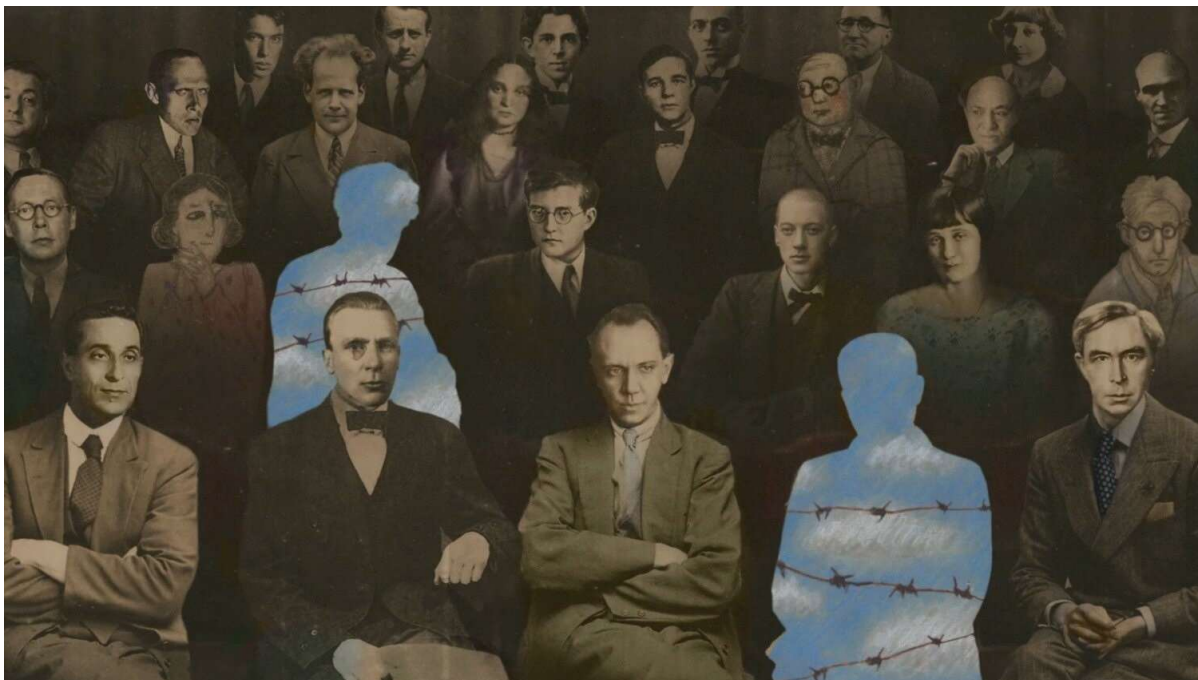
One can also find linguistic elements in Sasha Svirskii's *My Galactic Twin Galaction*, an ironic meta-film with a markedly lo-fi aesthetic (a blend of 1990s computer art and digital re-mediation of crafty animation techniques, such as photocopied cut-outs, etc.). In this short, an anonymous narrator discusses potential ideas for the plot of a film, along with comical nods to the moral manicheism of classic action films and an irresistible synth-rock soundtrack.

It is most of all *Yo*, by the Spanish director Begoña Arostegui, that addresses explicitly the arbitrariness of linguistic codes, and, perhaps more subtly, the possibility of reinventing them through animation. Indeed, the film would not look out of place in a university course on Saussurian linguistics. During a walk in the park, the protagonist, a nameless, happily middle-class employee in a mall, bumps into a sign which reads: 'PARK'. The fortuitous discovery throws the poor man into a Magritte-esque bafflement. Suddenly, albeit confusedly aware of the relativity of signs, the man starts labeling objects and places all around him. The labeling frenzy escalates to its foreseeable culmination: the film follows the man's downfall with bemused cordiality. A *divertissement*, yes, but one which strikes at the core of image-based representation and its mechanics. The fact that Arostegui links this element—let's call it linguistic debunking—to a mild satire of bourgeois attitudes, suggests something of a surrealist undercurrent—and indeed, surrealism and animation have long been amicable bedfellows.

It is however another mode of expression that seems to be doing most of the heavy lifting, once we move beyond language and embodied experience. A number of films in the 2020 selection appear to draw on modernist, and even post-modern, vocabularies in addressing what I see as the third key running thread of the programme: history.

Andrei Khrzhanovskij's *The Nose or Conspiracy of Mavericks* is a clear example of this. The film weaves an intricate tapestry of Russian history, ranging from Gogol's 1820s, Sostakovic's 1930s and the present. The opening sequence takes the viewers to an airborne plane, where the passengers, all key figures from the history and theater and literature, enjoy classics of cinema on the in-flight entertainment screens. From here, we jump to an animated production of Sostakovic's opera *The Nose*, composed in the early 1920s and based on Gogol's novella. Khrzhanovskij's animated adaptation spruces Gogol's plot with iconographic elements of the 1930s. The reason for the conceit, itself a nod to Orson Welles' Mercury Theatre, becomes immediately clear as the film quickly moves to interject the opera with a rather jocular segment about the 'friendship' between a bored Stalin and Mikhail Bulgakov. Having introduced the Soviet dictator as a character, then, the segment closes as Stalin decides to visit the theater, and attend, ditto, a performance of Sostakovic's *The Nose*. From this point onward the structure of the film becomes more linear. Stalin finds the music 'cacophonous', which paves the way to his clamping down on all 'formalist' art. In its coda, the film combines ironic excerpts of Zdanovian rhetoric with the dark shadows of the Great Purge.



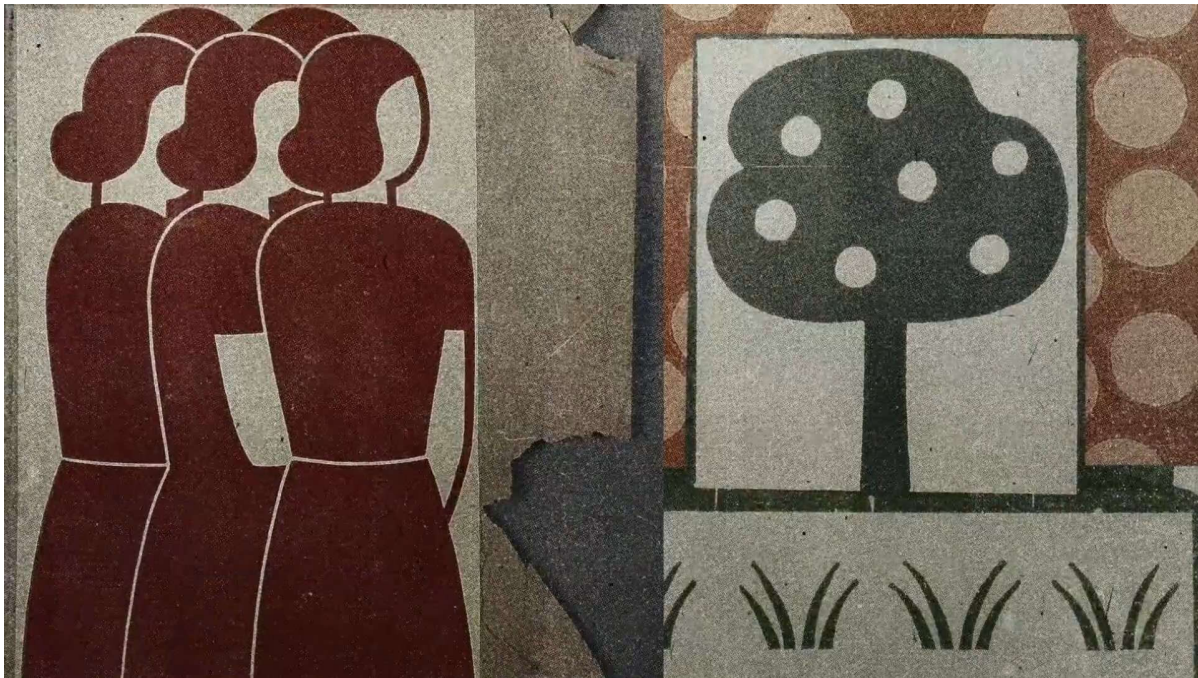


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Figure 2: The painful past of Soviet cultural history resurfaces in Andrei Khrzhanovskij's *The Nose or Conspiracy of Mavericks* (2020). Produced by School-Studio "SHAR".

The result is a genuinely complex work, in which sincere (even moving) anti-totalitarian ethos and fanciful irony meet a sophisticated taste for allegory and formal experimentation. The latter in particular emerges as much through Sostakovic's music as it does in the use of pastiche (Khrzhanovsky uses photographs, cut-outs, archival footage), and in the overlapping of several different layers, both temporal and diegetic (Gogol and Sostakovic, for example, appear as viewers of their own opera). The mix has a distinct postmodern feel, and indeed, Jennifer Lynde Barker spoke of 'postmodern political fairytales' to describe the film on *Notebook*. [\[3\]\[#N3\]](#) What is certain is that Khrzhanovsky blends the living legacy of the past with a formidable expressive freedom, and his film is without doubt one of the apexes of the festival overall, well deserving of the Jury's prize.

Similarly impressive is Dalibor Barić's *Accidental Luxuriance of the Translucent Watery Rebus*, a Croatian feature which can be best described as a retro-futurist *polar* in the vein of Godard's *Alphaville*: memorable one-liners ("the future is a past construction site abandoned due to lack of funds"), and an overarching sense that history might well be nearing its end, fuel a sharp, anti-capitalist and anti-consumerist critique. Pushed onward by a plethora of modernist techniques (collages, echoes of Pop Art, color-processed loops of archival film clips) the film is a veritable experimental blast, not to say a feast for the eyes.



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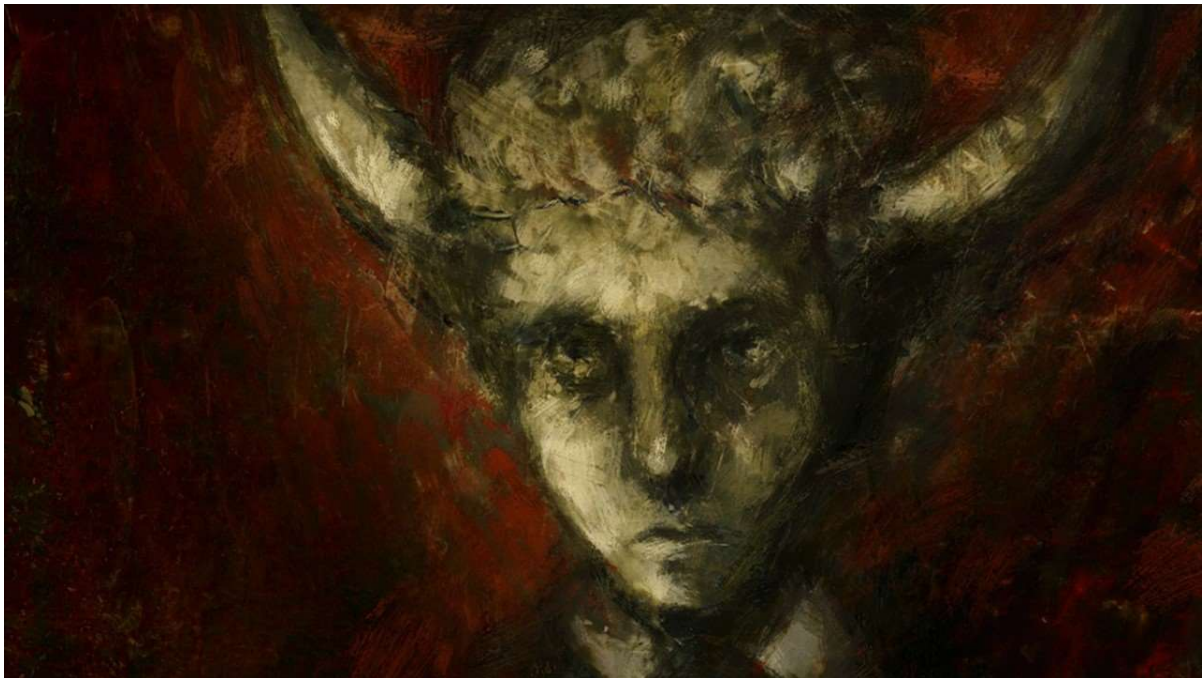
Figure 3: Example of Dalibor Barić's use of collage in *Accidental Luxuriance of the Translucent Watery Rebus* (2020). Produced by Kaos.

Formal audacity is not a mantra, however, and I for one am not convinced by Lynde Barker's suggestion to extend the 'postmodern' label to the other historical films in the programme. *My Favorite War*, for example, by Latvian director Ilze Burkovska Jacobsen, is an animated memoir à la *Waltz with Bashir*, but one which lacks both the psychoanalytical and deconstructionist elements of Ari Folman's film, not to say Khrzhanovsky's formal awareness. To be sure, the film offers a heart-felt denunciation of propaganda, and a solid coming-of-age plot, but not much more (despite the somewhat inexplicable Contrechamp prize), and certainly not enough to warrant the postmodern label.

The post-Communist legacy linking Burkovska Jacobsen and Khrzhanovsky also extends elsewhere in the programme: from the bittersweet space elegy of *Cosmonaut*, by the Estonian Kaspar Jancis, to the wondrous *The Physics of Sorrow*, by the Bulgarian Theodore Ushev. It is, perhaps, a case of converging means and needs: animation has always had a prestigious tradition in what used to be the Eastern bloc, and President Putin's attempts to rewrite recent Russian history might also have something to do with the need for these animators to confront the legacy of the past.

Whatever the reason, Ushev's film is very likely the other peak of the festival: a sentiment shared by the jury, who crowned the entry with the Crystal d'Annecy, the top prize for its category. Made using encaustic painting, and produced by the National Film Board of Canada, *The Physics of Sorrow* adapts the novel of the same title by contemporary writer Georgi Gospodinov. Rossif Sutherland's narration guides the viewer through a man's recollections of his youth in 1980s' Bulgaria. The identity of the man remains unclear, though he may be seen as a melding of the animator and the novelist. Slowly, a complex architecture of desire takes shape: a youthful romance with a circus acrobat blends with the tale of the Minotaur. The encaustic, which relies on the artist handling a pigmented mixture while still hot, turns the idea of re-moulding the past into animating practice. Eventually, as the narration progresses, the narrator's Proustian search gives way to musings about the nature of time, and finally overlaps with the desire for History, as a vanishing locus of greater meaning.





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Figure 4: A nod to the myth of the Minotaur in Theodore Ushev's *The Physics of Sorrow* (2019).

Produced by the National Film Board of Canada.

Recapturing time and life through form: Ushev's choice of technique suggests a potential, markedly modernist response to the challenge highlighted at the beginning of this article. Again, the internet is not merely a technology of distribution. Embedded in the online transition is the potential risk of digital images subsuming both experiences and representations within the dominant paradigms of content and consumption. This aspect of the digital convergence threatens the delicate balance of animation between art and commerce, and calls into question the cultural project of the festival to present itself as a unifying space between distinct aesthetic and geographical traditions.

It is deeply reassuring, then, to see someone like Ushev so fearlessly engaged in carving meaning out of the hot stuff of life, history and (visual) language. The Annecy project might be in crisis, but the Annecy programme suggests that animation can still play its utopian role of re-opening a space of possibility. After all, to borrow another one-liner from Dalibor Baric's *Accidental Luxuriance*: "People used to believe Earth was the whole gramophone. Now they believe it's the third song on the record."

## Author Biography

PM Cicchetti is a film writer and scholar based between Bologna and Edinburgh. He is a regular contributor to a number of film magazines in Italy and in the US, and has held lecturing posts at various universities in Scotland since 2012. His research focuses on the semiotics of culture: his doctoral thesis studied the legacy of Puritan discourse and Western mythologies in American cinema during the early years of the Obama presidency. For recent updates on his writings and musings, visit <http://pmcicchetti.eu> [<http://pmcicchetti.eu>].

## Notes

1. Elsa Keslassy and Elsa Keslassy, 'Cannes Film Festival Won't Go Virtual If All Else Fails', *Variety* (blog), 7 April 2020, <https://variety.com/2020/film/global/cannes-film-festival-wont-go-virtual-coronavirus-1234572974/>.♣. [[#N1-ptri](#)]
2. Paul Wells and Johnny Hardstaff, *Re-Imagining Animation: Contemporary Moving Image Cultures* (Lausanne: AVA Academia, 2008), 48.♣. [[#N2-ptri](#)]

3. Jennifer Lynde Barker, 'Cosmonauts of Sorrow and Nostalgia: Annecy's Postmodern Meditations on the Past', *Notebook*, 10 July 2020, <http://mubi.com/notebook/posts/cosmonauts-of-sorrow-and-nostalgia-annecy-s-postmodern-meditations-on-the-past>.<sup>♠</sup>[\[#N3-ptri\]](#)

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