

FLEE – A European Success Story

Panelists:

Fabrice PUCHAULT, Head of Society and Culture Department at ARTE France

Anne CHARBONNEL, Commissioning Editor at ARTE France

Jean-François LE CORRE, Producer at Vivement lundi !

Monica HELLSTRÖM, Producer at Final Cut for Real

Marcel JEAN, Artistic Director of the Annecy International Animation Film Festival

Moderated by Daniela ELSTNER, Executive Director at Unifrance

Intro by Daniela Elstner

It's the first time a documentary gets nominated in 3 categories at the Oscars : animation, documentary and best international film which is really ground-breaking. The film began its carrier in Cannes then went to Sundance, Annecy, Telluride, Toronto, New York among and many more festivals, and counts over 40 sold territories by now.

It's a success story and very impressive film.

Interview

Daniela Elstner: The director and the main character of the film were childhood friends and decided to make this film together. Can you tell us how you found yourself involved in this project?

Monica Hellström: I've actually known Jonas back from my previous job at the Danish Film Institute where I was taking care of the talent workshop and where he had his first documentary film 18 years ago.

Then in 2013 he came up with the idea to make an animated documentary film about this childhood friend he'd known since he was 16, of whom he knew nothing apart from the fact that he was a refugee from Afghanistan without knowing anything from his backstory, nor how he had arrived in Denmark or what had been prior to their friendship.

Daniela Elstner: Could you introduce us to the animation process and techniques used in the film?

Monica Hellström: We knew from the start that we couldn't afford to make the whole film in 2D so we chose to use 3 different techniques. We used expensive and very detailed 2D animation to illustrate the present, and something more graphic and abstract to talk about the past and the often very emotional memories of Amin. We also used footage to relate real elements of time and places so people don't forget this is a documentary and to show them the places where Amin had lived such as Kabul in the 80s.

As we met Sun Creature Studio, a new company whose founders were freshly graduated from animation School in Denmark and became our partners right from the start, Jonas and I had no experience in animation and so it was like a first time for them and for us and we sort of grew up together through this project we really wanted to build.

It was Sun Creature Studio who introduced us to Jean-François Le Corre and Mathieu Courtois of Vivement lundi! who became partners of the project as well. The great thing was that Jean-François understood documentary as well as animation so this was like a bridge between us and he helped us a lot in how to tell people to understand these drawings and what would become of them, like when we met ARTE for the first time for instance.

Daniela Elstner: Jean-François, apart the personal connections that brought you on the project what about the topic?

Jean-François Le Corre: Yes it was about the topic and the format. I'm really interested in documentaries as it is a very powerful media to tell these kind of stories where you are lacking a lot of visual elements and you want to put something more than archives in the story to incarnate characters of very strong and difficult stories.

I was told about FLEE in 2015 for the first time and in June 2016 I saw a first trailer of the film at the MIFA in Annecy. It was incredible because all the concept of the movie was represented in this 1,5 minute and I clearly understood that Jonas knew what he was able to do with animation and in what way it would be a powerful tool for him to use. After having read the script it was clear for us that Jonas and Amin were writing a powerful story. The emotion of the finished movie already was showing in the script. So we jumped into this project in 2016.

Daniela Elstner: Did you immediately feel this had to go to ARTE?

Jean-François Le Corre: Don't forget that back in 2016 it was very complicated for French producers to find broadcasters interested in animation for adults. From the beginning with Monica, we decided to send the project immediately after Annecy and we got a really quick answer from ARTE and a first meeting. At the end of it ARTE wanted to be in and that's how we signed the first development deal. At this stage it was easier for us as French partners to fund the project.

ARTE and the regions of Bretagne and Hauts de France were definitely a first very powerful funding in France.

Daniela Elstner: Can you give us the amount of the whole budget?

Monica Hellström: It's 3,5 million euros. For me in Denmark the coming on board of ARTE France was very important as well because it put pressure on the Danish funders to go in with more money and I really needed that extra push and ARTE opened that door for us.

Daniela Elstner: Anne as Commissioning Editor, Fabrice as Head of Commissioning for Documentaries at ARTE, when the project came in as an animation documentary, how did you realize this is what you needed and wanted to get involved in?

Anne Charbonnel: Actually Monica got in touch with me in 2016 right after MIFA and she sent me a 2 page flyer presenting FLEE and we thought it was so ambitious, such an unusual story that still echoed today that we had to be part of it. ARTE got definitely on board in May 2017 and from then on it was really like a dream coming true every step of the way.

Fabrice Puchault: It's a really beautiful story from the development to the co-production agreement one year later. ARTE is about Europe. It is neither a French nor a German channel but a European one. Its goal is to build a European platform for high quality projects. We had already worked with Final Cut For Real before and with Jean-François Le Corre on other projects. We are looking for talent and unusual narratives and FLEE is exactly about that. A strong point of view, an extremely poetic film and it shifts the narratives. It reflects the talent of a team, it's a collective work.

Daniela Elstner: You push the start button with your financing but then you are also there as a partner during the whole post-production process. Could you tell us about more about ARTE's involvement?

Anne Charbonnel: We were indeed working all the way with Monica and Jean-François, going through each new version of the script together, having regular meetings, also visiting the animation studio in Copenhagen, and there was a real dialogue between ARTE, Monica, Jean-François and Jonas, at all stages of the production process. The key to making a very strong film is to keep the dialogue and to be very open about what everyone is thinking and how the film is progressing.

Jean-François Le Corre: Yes, in animation everything must be agreed on before the shooting. There's no rushes in animation it's a one shot. It means that we spent a lot of time sharing scripts, storyboards before the production of the pictures to make sure we were all on the same page.

Daniela Elstner: Marcel, let's go back to 2015 at MIFA. Tell us your story with the project?

Marcel Jean: As you noticed it is in the DNA of the Annecy Festival and Market to support projects at different stages of their production and sometimes it means very early in the production. For us when we selected the film for a WIP session it was obvious that FLEE had all the qualities that we were looking for : a strong subject, a great singularity, a narrative way of approaching documentary material in animation. As an animation festival for 20 years we know that the animated documentary constitutes a groundswell.

FLEE is finding its form at a place where there is a crossing theme between documentary, animation and even the narrative of fiction. The film was in competition in 2021, and received the cristal award and now we are all together at the Academy Awards with these 3 nominations.

Conclusion by Daniela Elstner: What you just said sums it up nicely. We can talk about documentary or animation but the film has a such strong narrative that it goes beyond the question of genre. It's a film that manages to take a look at the world's problems, without diminishing their gravity through its poetry. It makes us forget about geographical borders because it is a European project and a European film. We forget about genres and it's just an emotional journey that takes us and I hope this journey will take you far to the Oscars in Los Angeles. Unifrance wishes you the best luck!
Thank you for this discussion