
INTERVIEW WITH GERBEN SCHERMER, DIRECTOR OF THE HOLLAND ANIMATION FILM FESTIVAL

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Gerben Schermer (Netherlands, 1959) founded the Holland Animation Film Festival together with animation filmmaker Gerrit van Dijk, in 1985. Schermer has developed a distinguished career in selection and programming for HAFF, and he has composed guest programmes for numerous international festivals. He has held positions as a board member and consultant for international organisations. Nowadays Schermer is active in the advisory committee for the Grant Programme for Design of the Creative Industries Fund. Gerben Schermer has been involved in film production as well. In 2010 he produced *Clown's Revolution* by the Chinese visual artist Sun Xun, who worked as artist-in-residence of the HAFF. In this interview Gerben Schermer talk to us about the profile of the Holland Animation Film Festival, his vision about animation and many other interesting issues for animation professionals, students and fans.

Gerben Schermer (Países Bajos, 1959) puso en marcha el Holland Animation Film Festival junto al director de animación Gerrit van Dijk, en 1985. Schermer ha desarrollado una destacada carrera en la selección y programación para el HAFF, además de diseñar programas invitados para numerosos festivales internacionales. Ha sido miembro de organizaciones y consultor de organismos internacionales, y en la actualidad es miembro del comité asesor del Programa de Diseño del fondo para las industrias creativas. Schermer ha estado también involucrado en la producción de películas, y en 2010 produjo *Clown's Revolution*, del artista visual chino Sun Xun, que trabajó como artista en residencia para el HAFF. En esta entrevista Gerben Schermer nos habla del perfil del Holland Animation Film Festival, su visión sobre la animación y otros muchos temas de interés para profesionales, estudiantes y aficionados a la animación.

It's Monday, 7th of July 2014, around twelve noon. I meet Gerben Schermer at the headquarters of the Holland Animation Film Festival - HAFF, in Utrecht (The Netherlands). We start recording the interview, but suddenly, an alarm sounds in the room. It is the "luchtalarm" (aerial alarm) an emergency rehearsal repeated in every Dutch city the first Monday of each month, at twelve o'clock. Gerben Schermer jokes about it saying that if someone is considering attacking Holland, for sure, it would happen at that time. After this obligatory pause, we start.

The HAFF was founded in 1985. In the beginning, it was conceived as biannual, but it has been taking place annually since 2009. The next event, 18th to 22nd of March 2015, will be already the 18th edition of HAFF. This festival highlights, with personality, among others with a similar life span, like Hiroshima International Animation Festival (Japan), Anima Festival (Belgium) or Stuttgart Festival of Animated Film (Germany). Probably, Gerben Schermer,

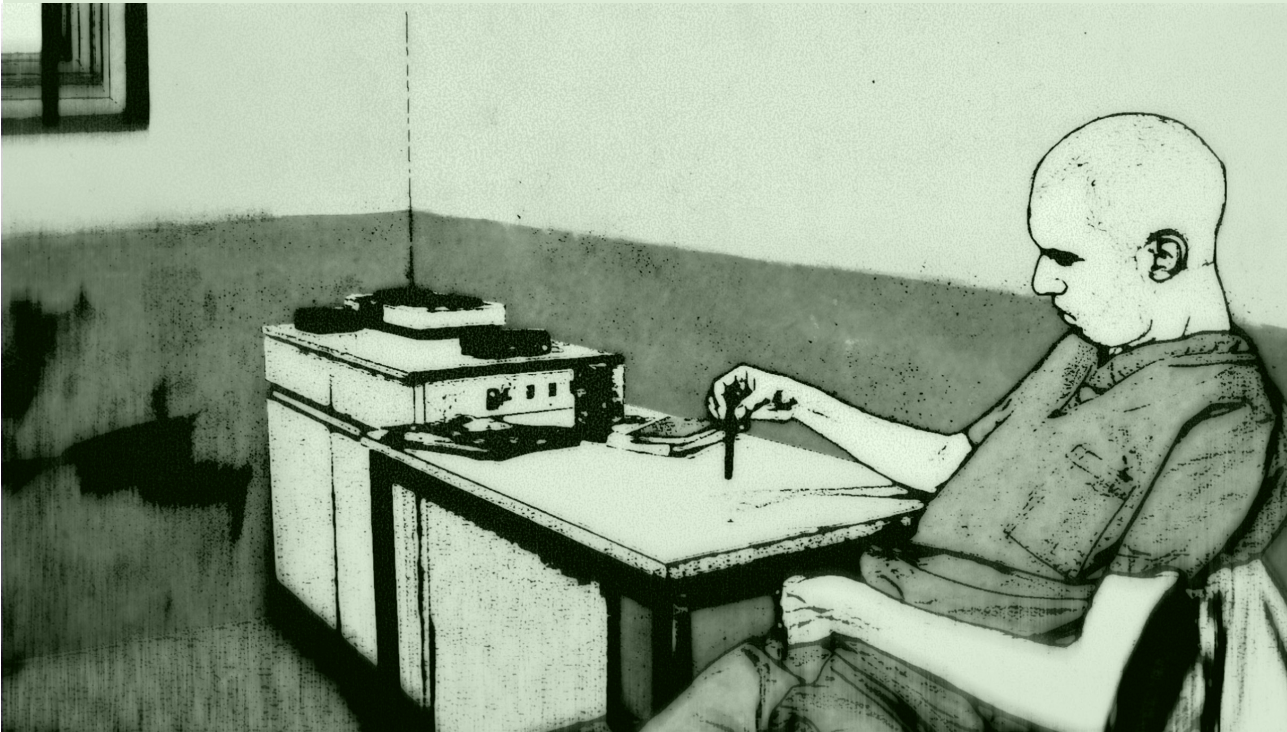
the director, has much to do with this different profile, because he personally selects the films for the official program, since its foundation nearly 30 years ago. Despite this, an international jury awards the prizes.

HAFF has also gathered in recent years major illustrators through its graphical image (poster, flyers, postcards), like Art Spiegelman, Charles Burns, Dave Cooper and Javier Mariscal. The official poster of HAFF is conceived independently from the leader, which is produced by main independent animation directors, like Han Hoogerbruge, Phil Mulloy, Rosto and Konstantin Bronzit for the upcoming edition of the festival. The previous one, made for HAFF 2014 by Andreas Hykade, won the award for best advertising animation in the Ottawa International Animation Festival 2014.

The programme of HAFF seems to be quite provocative most of the time, because of the diversity of films that contains both, narrative and

Fig. 1 – Logo of the Holland Animation Film Festival.

Fig. 2 – *Le Labyrinthe* (Mathieu Labaye, 2013). Grand Prix short non-narrative, HAFF 2014.



experimental ones. However, as Schermer says: “that’s not the intention, maybe it’s our taste”. In any case, Schermer is committed to animation as an independent art form, and seeks to show the most varied proposals. Though child oriented animation is out of the competitive program, animation for children is also programmed at the festival. Schermer defends this point by saying that as it happens in live action festivals, or other related disciplines such as literature or music, animation for children, commercial animation or animation for adults also belong to different universes. In his view, to gather those under the reason of being made in animation can derive in a superficial view of the animation itself. The HAFF seeks to approximate animation to adults, and above all, to delve into ideas and concepts behind the films.

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01

The festival (HAFF)

¿What makes HAFF different from other international animation film festivals?

I think that the profile of the festival is very much artistically oriented, so we go for the art of animation, more than the commercial one. We want to promote the individuality and the differences between one animator and other. By doing this though, we also show films that are more commercial but we go for differences, not for mainstream.

And not only for films, but also for installation art or other art forms.

Yes, that is something new. Animation is more than film, animation you can see in very different forms, like installations, but also animation specially made for the mobile telephone, interactive animation. A few years ago Internet animation was really hot, but what does Internet animation mean? If you put your film on the Internet, is it an Internet animated film?

You have been the director of the festival from the very beginning, was it your initiative or did somebody else invite you to direct it?

No, it wasn't my idea; it was Gerrit van Dijk's, filmmaker in Holland, who passed away two years ago. He took the initiative to have a festival, in 1985. At the same time I was working here as a trainee, and because of my love for animation, I had the opportunity to organize the festival.

It seems like HAFF has been focused on Asiatic animation in recent years, is it a fact?

Not really, it is very interesting what is happening in China now, so I focus on that, but in the past, I focused on Russia, for the same reason. Nowadays, it is very interesting, but maybe in two or three years this will be over. I look for interesting development from all over the world and present what is interesting.

What are the next goals or challenges of HAFF for the coming editions?

I would like to be closer to students, to do residence programmes, and to do more installations. I would like to broaden the scope of animation, and the use of animation. Therefore, I would like to see the festival as a meeting point where people see a different kind of animation that they are used to.

02

The dutch animation

What is the role of HAFF in the promotion of the Dutch animation?

Well, by organizing a festival, you give attention to animation film, that's one thing, and we do programme for foreign festivals, like guest programming. At the festival, we have a programme called Best Dutch Animated Film, with an audience award. We have competitions for the best craftsmanship; it can be anything, the making of the film, the techniques, the storytelling. An award given by a professional jury.

Fig. 3 – *Love Games* (Culture Platform, 2013).
Grand Prix short narrative, HAFF 2014.



Which animation schools would you say are the best in Holland?

It depends of course on what kind of film you want to make, but the ones that are at the top right now are St. Joost in Breda, the HKU, in Utrecht, and Willem de Kooning, in Rotterdam. St. Joost is really focused on author film, and the HKU was always more focused on the industry, television and so on, but this is changing now, and currently there is a very interesting development at the KHU.

Can you give us some names of the new generation of animation directors in Holland?

Rosto, Adriaan Lockman, Marten Kopman, he is a little bit from an older generation,

but is still doing well, and then many young people like Job, Joris & Marieke.

Are there author directors?

Yes, there is not really an industry in Holland; this is coming now, with a new support program for feature films to stimulate to industry. In Next month in September (2014) there will be the premiere of a feature animated film completely animated in Holland. This is quite special, because we don't have this tradition. There was an animated feature film in the eighties' of last century, and one a few of years ago, but there were mainly produced from Holland but made abroad, so really we don't have this profile, we have more an history on making advertising films. Now, things are changing, and more and more television series are made in Holland. What you also need is a kind of infrastructure,



so the talent can hop from studio to studio. In the past, people like Gerrit van Dijk and Paul Driessen, they made most of the things themselves, animating, compositing, editing, and everything. Not like in Estonia for example, where they have a studio structure, and everybody is playing a role, or even in Russia, that they have directors that can't even draw.

03

The experimental animation

Has the festival changed a lot since the very beginning until now?

In the beginning, we were more focused on film only, and besides independent animated shorts on commissioned films, like advertising

and so on. Because advertising was very underrated in film industry. And, I mean normally advertising agencies, and so they make advertising films themselves, but in animation, it were more individual animation artists who were not employed by the agencies made the animated advertisement. So, we were promoting that segment, but nowadays this is not so necessary. We show them, and since there's still lot of money available in the advertising industry, filmmakers still have the opportunity to make a beautiful commissioned film thanks to a higher budget. And since 2000, we have an international competition for independent short, and for independent shorts, with the categories narrative and non-narrative. Because normally, when you put those categories together the prizes always go to the narrative film, and then, the non-narrative film gets the special mention.

Fig. 4 – Mute (Job, Joris & Marieke, 2013). Audience Award Dutch animation, HAFF 2014.



Fig. 5 – *The Fake* (Sang-ho Yeon, 2013). Grand Prix feature film, HAFF 2014.

Yes, it is difficult to compare, because they play with different rules.

Yes, and people don't want to compare. Many people just like experimental films less.

Yes, it's true. And why do you think that is?

It is too difficult, it is not entertainment, and people want to be entertained.

And is it a problem to put together in one festival these two categories?

No, it is not a problem; we develop now a program of installations, so we are going in that direction as well. I think there are only a few festivals that really go deep into ani-

mation, in this concept of experiment and so. I think *Fantoché* is one of them, as well as *Zagreb*, but some live action festivals that take care of these kinds of things.

04

Writing on animation: The theory

What do you think about the theory of animation, about writing or talking about animation?

I think it is very important, I mean, it is also very important for understanding animation. Animation students for example are not reading about animation. There are not very open to other people films, they just want

to make their own film, but I think that is very important for people to learn about, animation as well, academically. Then of course, we work together with the University in Utrecht; and we do scholar programmes with the university.

The consequence of this lack of theoretical background is that instead of looking for a personal expression, most of the people are trying to achieve aesthetics that already exist.

Theory of animation is very important, like theory of film, or theory of art. Many filmmakers are not really open to other art forms than animation, they only focus on animation.

05

Animation students

Which advice would you give to a student or young director that already has made a film and wants to send it to festivals? For example, how to choose the festivals or what steps they have to follow.

They really shouldn't choose, since the films are already digitally available. It's not like in the past, in the past, 10/15 years ago, you had to submit a DG Beta, or you had to submit a 35mm print, what is very expensive, then you had to make a selection of festivals, because you had only one or two prints. And now, with digital, I would say send it to as much festivals as possible, and then definitely it depends on the quality of the film. Leave the selection process to the festivals, they know what they are looking for. And not being selected at a particular festival doesn't mean you made a bad film, but it simply doesn't fit in (that year's) festival.

Do you think that it is important to choose the profile of the festival?

No, they'll find out. On certain moment they'll find out themselves what kind of festivals are interested their films. There are film festivals that select everything, they are not very critical. There are also festivals for certain kind of films, like student festivals or you have festivals with student categories. Definitely, I would say; don't be lazy, I mean when they graduate your job you only get your diploma, nothing else. It's only the beginning, you have to send it all over the places, and it's a lot of work. Promote yourself.

Yes but it's also that they cannot forget distribution during the production planning.

Yes, but people should learn. Many filmmakers are only interested in making film. But I think production is also very important. How to produce a film. In addition, if they produce a film they are really involved in and understand production. As a student, they can do and decide everything. Later on, after graduation, if they want to make a film of 5 minutes, they have to find a producer to find the money. If you don't know anything about production, you may complain lot much about the

Fig. 6 – *The Obvious Child* (Stephen Irwin, 2013).
Special mention short narrative, HAFF 2014.



I appreciate it if people look for a challenge. Many people look for audience pleasers. The most important for me, are challenges and experiment, new approaches, challenges for the audience.

producer. But if you understand production, you may still complain, but for a good reason. Because then you know what are you talking about, which is sending your films to festivals, but also distribution on the Internet (or not). And if they do, when to do it. Some festivals want to have a premiere. If you really make a good film, and not according to yourself but if everybody thinks you made a good film, and it's really high level, and they want to submit it for a festival like Berlin they should take care, of other screenings preceding the premiere in Berlin, they should read the rules. If they'll be accepted in Berlin, the film can't to be shown anywhere else, except in your own country. If you want to show your film in Venice, for example, you cannot show it in Annecy before. For animation festivals it doesn't work like that, is more for live action festivals that they want to have premieres. But nowadays there are more and more live action festivals who are showing animation.

Yes, you can see now many live action festivals selecting animation films inside their programmes, not in separated categories.

Exactly, it's part of the shows programme. Animation is more playful, they understand it. Animation is not changing that much but people are getting more open for animation. Because they see animation all over the place, like Internet, mobile telephone, and every-

thing, and because of this they think: hey, animation is important, we should do something with it. Instead of paying attention to fashionable themes like Internet animation or games, they include animation, in their regular programme. But so far, animation is not winning prizes at live action festivals.

As a jury member of many international festivals, what are the key elements that an animated film must to stand out the rest?

I cannot answer that question, because it depends on the selection, and you always look for a certain kind of films. Of course it's your personal choice, but at the same time, for example, you cannot start selecting a potential winner after watching one programme, because you have to see two third of the programme to get an overall view of the quality of the selection. And then, I personally always look for experiment, experiment in narration but also experiment in filmmaking, in direction, in design. I appreciate it if people look for a challenge. Many people look for audience pleasers. The most important for me, are challenges and experiment, new approaches, challenges for the audience.

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Fig. 7 – Wind (Robert Löbel, 2013). Grand Prix European student film, HAFF 2014.



Biography

Sara Álvarez Sarrat is an Animation lecturer at the Faculty of Fine Arts UPV. She started her career as an animator working at the animation companies Tiranosaurus Producciones and Truca Films, and with an internship at the *Animation World Network* online magazine (Los Angeles, California). She has delivered papers at international animation conferences animation, and she has published papers at specialized magazines (*Animation Studies Journal*, 2013, *Hispanic Research Journal*, 2014). In 2011 she significantly contributed to the publication *Raoul Servais. Integral de cortometrajes*, supported by the Festival Internacional de Cine de Huesca. In 2012 she curated the exhibition *Surviving Life: Collages de la película de Jan Švankmajer* (sala Josep Renau, Valencia).

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