

festival review

TAAFI Industry 2018

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The Toronto Animated Arts Festival International (TAAFI) is a fairly recent addition to Canada's diverse body of animation festivals. This was the first year of the festival's Industry Conference, held during November, 2018. The organization, founded in 2012, comprises a film festival, a job fair, speaker conferences and a variety of industry and public events throughout the year. Their ambitious mission is to make Toronto the premiere international destination for animated arts and entertainment. Therefore, the TAAFI Industry 2018 was described on its website as the "animation event of the year," and promoted a diverse selection of speakers that "are changing the industry and are bound to inspire" (TAAFI, 2018). While that seemed an impressive boast, judging by the guest speakers and panels offered at the 2018 event, (such as the panels "Authentic Voices: Reflecting Diversity in Kids' TV" and "Female Creators Showcase"), TAAFI was serious about its intention to position itself as a catalyst of action in the animation world while promoting relevant discussions concerning the current state of the animated arts.

As a Brazilian animation studies scholar and professional scriptwriter foreign to the Canadian animation scene, I was interested to see the intersections between the current Canadian animation industry and contemporary academic discussions. TAAFI promised very interesting and

diverse panels, which aimed to discuss the present and future of the animated arts and entertainment not only in the Canadian context, but also from an international angle. The "unspoken theme of this year's industry event [was] 'change'" (TAAFI Pamphlet, 2018) and the stated purpose of the conference was to help the industry grow, to engage with the community, to explore what is going on in the world of animation, and to understand where animation is heading. This was reflected in several questions the panels aimed to debate: "How has our industry changed over the decades?" and "In what ways has technology changed how we tell and share our stories?" While TAAFI raised very good questions, some of the panels seemed to miss the main focus of the event. They were concerned not with issues that relate to the animation field as a whole, but on individuals and their personal stories of professional and creative development.

Animation is increasingly seen as more than a mere kids' audiovisual genre, but as a respected medium on its own, both within scholarly debates and the broader cultural landscape. More scholars are being drawn to animation studies every year, developing a robust body of academic work. The reasoning behind animation's change of status in the present-day artistic universe is crucial in order to understand its importance in society's cultural landscape, and how it is shaping it,

and the possibilities that the future reserves. The analysis of technology's effect on creation, labour relations and cultural impact is not only vital to better comprehend the animated medium, but also extremely relevant in today's age of representation and diversity.

In panels originally dedicated to broader debates about the animated world, I would have preferred more engaging discussions about animation's situation as a whole. However, many of the speakers in those panels focused instead on their personal histories – showcasing the particularities of their works and accomplishments, accompanied with some good advice for future creators. In spite of that, some of the speakers seemed out of touch with different (as in non-privileged) realities. They expressed such sentiments as, “If a creator wants, he just goes and make it,” or gave advice like “When I couldn't get the job I wanted, I created it for myself.” This may sound inspiring for an animator, but for me it had the opposite effect. Those affirmations sounded like the product of living inside a privileged bubble, and did not acknowledge diverse experiences, realities, backgrounds and opportunities.

There were, however, panels explicitly dedicated to personal trajectories. These panels provided spaces to learn about the industry's operation through personal experience, emphasizing how the creative process is imagined and put in practice. Take, for instance, legendary animator Dan Haskett's talk, “Designing the Animation Renaissance,” that was dedicated to discussing his career, or the four very interesting “Behind The Scenes” talks. These panels were clearly intended to show the particularities of creating and producing specific animations, featuring diverse contemporary works with different scopes of production, animation style, genre and target audiences. The animations featured in the “Behind the Scenes” panels included a NFB produced stop-motion short film *Bone Mother* (Dale Hayward, Sylvie Trouvé, 2018), an indigenous-led student short movie *Wawatay* (Ben Kicknosway, Morgan Kagesheongai, Neil Affleck, 2018), an independent Canadian-American-Chinese feature film acquired by Netflix, *Next Gen* (Kevin R. Adams, Joe Ksander, 2018), and an original Netflix series, *Final Space* (Olan Rogers, 2018). As these examples show, TAAFI emphasized works that reflect today's cultural landscape, celebrating diversity and inclusion.

Those issues notwithstanding, some of the panels did discuss the larger context, echoing the stated purposes of the event – and, by doing so, acted as counterparts to the inquiries made by academic animation researchers. The opening speaker, Fred Seibert, founder and CEO of Frederator Studios, is a very successful and well-known figure in the animation world. In his talk, he discussed how he produced a new series without meeting its creator in person. He also described how his company now operates by not owning the original ideas and shows' pilots – they are all owned by their creators. This is a far cry from a time when Ted Turner told him, “If I pay you, I own you.” Albeit this was said in passing, the change signals the vital importance of the internet and modern technologies in current productions, which can diversify the structural and labour relationship between executives and artists and promote a new type of exchange between creative people from different countries. These new modes of production for their ideas gives hope for peripheral artists and animators, who were formerly bound by restricted access to production companies and money.

Unsurprisingly, many of the female speakers at TAAFI addressed more directly the economic difficulties of making animated productions and having their voice heard and respected. The panel “Authentic Voices: Reflecting Diversity in Kids' TV” most directly addressed intersectionality within animation. With four speakers and a mediator coming from different backgrounds and cultures, the panel moved the discussion beyond the personal and amplified it – reflecting a preoccupation with engaging with bigger and socially relevant issues. Shabnam Rezaei, founder and president of Big Bad Boo Studios, an Iranian woman, was very emphatic about giving a voice to otherwise outcast populations in animations. She poignantly addressed how inaccurate media representation of different cultures and people lead to the wrongful perception of them, enabling the rise of xenophobia, populism, and right-wing politicians who anchor their actions in hate and ignorance, like Donald Trump (whom Rezaei called out by name, for the delight of the audience) and Jair Bolsonaro. The speakers called out for diverse representations that avoided easy answers and stereotypical portrayals. In order to bring authenticity and to depict diversity without appropriating it and falling into clichés, they recommended hiring diverse

creators, writers, animators and voice actors. Their entreaty reflects current academic debates around representation, labour relations in the animated industry, and how the diversification of animated themes and contents enriches our cultural environment.

During a panel in the Female Creators Showcase, “A Conversation With...” Linda Simensky, she discussed the intersections between academia and the industry. As someone who moves between the two, I strongly agreed with her views. Simensky is both a professor of animation history at the University of Pennsylvania and a very successful executive in the area and now the senior director of children’s programming at PBS. She argued that more people from the industry should talk at schools and universities, engaging directly with young and new artists and animators. While she meant that in the context of inspiring and bringing more women and diverse people into the animation industry, who were historically neglected and left aside, I also think that the opposite stands true. More people from academia such as professors, students, and researchers of animation studies, should be present at industry’s discussions such as TAAFI Industry.

The thoughts, concerns, debates and questionings that arise in this kind of event certainly resonate with academic inquiries. Regarding the animation world, both people from the industry and the academy are asking themselves the same things, albeit from different angles, points of view and analytic approaches. Since bringing diverse focal concerns to a debate only enriches it, why not promote better communication among people that inhabit and are interested in the same universe? In doing so, people working in the industry can better understand the dynamics behind labour, representation and even aesthetic issues, and academics can better apply their theoretical knowledge in a practical way, closer to the general public. In my own experience, being able to work with animation while studying it academically has been critical not only for my career, but also for my personal growth, as someone who strives to better comprehend our society and culture. TAAFI wants to be an animation hub, connecting (future) professionals with the industry and posing such important and great questions about the present and future of the animated arts. Why not bring the two communities together, in order to make our cultural landscape,

our medium richer and more diverse? It certainly seems to me that bringing scholarly content and interrogations to an industrial setting and vice-versa enhances the outcome of the discussions, enabling the growth of the animated medium as a truly diverse place.