ANIMATION SEMINAR PRODUCING ANIMATION
Netherlands Film Festival 25 September 2017 by Vera de Lange

Speakers: Zahra Dowlatabadi and Eric Goossens
Moderator: Tom van Waveren
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Summary

Following the successful animation seminar 'Storyboarding & Editing' last year at the Netherlands' Film Festival in Utrecht, this year ApN organized a second forum, entitled Producing Animation. The public and the speakers received a word of welcome by Ton Crone, director of ApN. The goal of these gatherings is to develop and increase expertise about animation. This time the seminar focused on producing animation, named after a book with the same title by Zahra Dowlatabadi. She gave a presentation about her experience as an animation producer in the US, followed by Eric Goossens from the production company Walking the Dog, based in Brussels, who focused on the European animation procedures and pipeline setups. Both of them illustrated their presentation with stills and clips from animation projects they have worked on. Moderator Tom van Waveren, CEO and creative director of Cake Entertainment in London, chairman of ApN and vice-chair of Animation Europe, introduced the speakers and led the panel discussion. There was a small but attentive audience, consisting of film directors and producers from both animated and live action films, as well as students aiming to work in this field. During the panel discussion, they asked many questions to the speakers and shared their own experiences.

Animation production is very diverse and ranges from one dedicated artist making drawings in his attic to major studios with hundreds of employees working with advanced software. Until recently, there was hardly any literature about the production process of animated films. The book Producing Animation, which is now a state-of-the-art guidebook for professionals and students alike, provided a good starting point to take a closer look at the organization and management of an animation project.

In her presentation, Zahra Dowlatabadi shared her experiences and lessons learned from 2D and 3D animated features, Direct-to-Videos and TV series in both major and independent studios in the US. After being in this business for some time, she noticed that the wheel was constantly re-invented. The workflows in animated films in her experience showed a big contrast with the live action part of the films she has worked on, in which everyone was very clear about their job. Because of this lack of continuity, the animated productions didn't reach their full potential. Considering that to be a waste of money, effort and time, she decided to gather the best practices with co-writer Kathy Winder, to help guide further productions in the future and to prevent making the same mistakes each time. She presents a snapshot of the current state of animation, the emersion and blend of new technology, where it might be taking us, and the impact of disrupters such as Netflix, Amazon and Google. She is sharing her experience and insight on US production studios, and leads the public through the process of producing animation from pitching until final delivery. When you are pitching an idea, her advice is to be a thorough researcher and analyze the priorities of the company you are pitching to, and make sure your online profile is welcoming and enjoyable. At the start of a production it is important to make agreements in advance about important production aspects like credits, the amount of creative retakes, delivery dates and payments. New technologies and programs such as ToonBoom have streamlined the production process. Current developments caused by companies as Google, Amazon and Netflix have made productions on the one hand more dependent on numbers of views and likes. On the other hand, they also make room for more risky projects and their platforms can make a quick access to a worldwide audience possible.

To compare the American situation with the European, Eric Goossens gave an overview of the production pipeline of animation studios on this continent. He took over the presentation from his co-founder Anton Roebben, who was ill. Since most European animated films are co-productions, an important part is the division of tasks between countries, which is connected with the different film funding obligations in each country. This process is so complicated that the whole discussion about the division of tasks may take three to four months. Each country has its own expertises and rules attached to funding. To make this process easier, he hopes that in the future in Europe more enduring connections and collaborations between partners will be developed. During the production process, it is important to follow a good structure and to prepare yourself well. Do not start before the script is greenlighted. You need to make a detailed breakdown of all the props, characters, background etc. in Shotgun, a data asset management system. This is an essential tool to keep the spending of time and money under control. He regards the new developments around companies as Netflix, Amazon and Google as an evolution which can have a positive influence on the financing and distribution of animated films.

Biographical Notes on the Speakers

Zahra Dowlatabadi has worked in animation for over thirty years. After graduating from the School of Cinema at the University of Southern California, Dowlatabadi started her career as an art coordinator for the renowned Japanese animation studio, Tokyo Movie Shinsha. Her feature credits include *Little Nemo: Adventures in Slumberland* (1989), *Once Upon A Forest* (1992), *The Pagemaster* (1994) *Space Jam* (1996) and *Quest for Camelot* (1998). She also worked on three direct-to-video sequels of *Land Before Time* and most recently on *The Jetsons & WWE: Robo-Wrestlemania* (2107) and *Scooby-Doo! Shaggy's Showdown* (2107). Dowlatabadi has worked in the producer capacity for both major and independent studios including Warner Bros., Disney, Universal Studios and Bento Box Entertainment.

Together with Catherine Winder, Dowlatabadi wrote the book *Producing Animation*, a comprehensive guide which provides step-by-step details on how to produce an animated project starting with an idea all the way through development, pre-production, production and post production. Published by Focal Press in 2001, the second edition was released in 2011 and there are plans for a third edition due out in 2019. Translated in Chinese and Korean, *Producing Animation* has become the reference guide for animation industry professionals and students alike on a global scale.

Eric Goossens studied political & communication sciences at the Catholic University of Leuven. After his career in the companies Little Big One and Trix, he founded the production company Walking The Dog in 1999 together with his partner Anton Roebben. The company, which is based in the centre of Brussels and in the C-Mine in Genk, produces creative animated feature length films and series. The first project WTD was involved in, *The Triplets of Belleville* (2003, Sylvain Chomet) was nominated for an Oscar. *Brendan and the Secret of Kells* (2009) was the second Oscar nominated film WTD worked on. Next to the co-production of animated series such as *Kika & Bob* and *Picknick with Pie* and animated shorts, WTD was recently involved as co-producer in the successful CGI movie *A Monster in Paris* (2011), in co-production with EuropaCorp and in the 2D animation feature *Pinocchio* (2012) and *Le Jour des Corneilles* (2011). Goossens is also the chairman of anim.be (an association of Belgian animation producers), guest lecturer at the LUCA school of arts, board member of Cinekid for professionals and owner of the documentary production company Off World.

The audience attending the seminar ranged from animation and live action veterans to young filmmakers and students. During the panel discussion, they asked many questions from the speakers and also shared their own experiences.

Presentation: Zahra Dowlatabadi

Zahra Dowlatabadi started her presentation by offering a snapshot of the current state of animation for Television and Feature Production and the impact of cutting edge technology and the new emerging applications and platforms. She began with sharing the reasons behind writing *Producing Animation*. The first reason had to do with Dowlatabadi's discovery that on almost every production she worked on, there was a form of re-inventing the wheel, which led to a considerable waste of talent, time and money. The second reason manifested itself when she worked on the live action portion of *Page Master*. Every member of the live action cast and crew had a clear understanding of his or her respective duties on the set. All tasks were quantified with set daily expectations so the team could use their talent, budget and timeline to get the best possible results out of pre-production, principal photography and post. All the advanced planning enabled the producer to handle the issues that inevitably came up and trouble shoot with efficiency. This experience played a pivotal role for Dowlatabadi wanting to collaborate with Winder to offer a set of best practices for animation production that could be used as a reference point and tailored per each project's specific requirements.

Pitching Ideas
Offering advice on pitching preparation and presentation, Dowlatabadi had the following pointers: Always research who you are pitching to, and make sure your content fits into the feature studio's roster or the television programmer's lineup. If for example your content is geared towards children, be aware of the standard expectations that cover themes such as inclusion, diversity and gender-neutrality. If on the other hand you are preparing material for the Chinese market, familiarize yourself with the culture and the fact that ghost and magic for example are considered taboo subjects.

Following up on the topic of developing content, Dowlatabadi added that having an 'elevator pitch' so your idea is easy to share and 'gettable' (as though you were surprised to find yourself on an elevator ride with a studio executive) is the top priority. She emphasized the importance of having fleshed out and authentic main characters and antagonists so that the viewer can get thoroughly invested in your storyline and their plight. If there is artwork attached, Dowlatabadi recommends that you start with a polished piece of art, since visuals can be so much more impactful than words, but at the same time, it is critical that the pitch art is on par, or better than the quality of animation that is currently being produced by the executive you are pitching to. Lastly she shared that too often, pitches are sidelined by content relating to potential offshoots such as games, interactive toys and clothing. Although having a cross-platform appeal can be a bonus, it never replaces the importance of a fully developed core idea that works in a narrative.

Importance of Online Presence
Presenting a winning idea in a pitch room is certainly an important battle won, however, maintaining an on-line presence that is welcoming and visually compelling is another key component to the evaluation. With the digital age in place, Dowlatabadi added, it should be noted that there are different set of metrics being used. For example how many followers does an artist have? How many views has a YouTube short received in what length of time? When an innovative short is launched on a platform such as 360 Google Spotlight Story, it can take as few as a couple of hours before a studio executive may be reaching out to the short's creators, bypassing agents/representations and the festival circuit. Dowlatabadi stressed the importance of creating the right digital profile and maintaining a professional and polished online presence.

When looking to partner with artists or studios on potential future projects, Dowlatabadi always researches their website and other resources such as LinkedIn and Glassdoor to further explore creative compatibility. She believes in the importance of having shared values as far as fostering a healthy work environment where the studio culture enables the creative and production team to thrive.

Television and Feature Production Timelines
Once an idea has been green lit for a TV series or a feature, Dowlatabadi shared how potential timelines can be put in place. Starting with an average timeline for a 2D series, she emphasized the importance of preparation for the launch of the series. With the assumption that the main artwork has been completed and three to five scripts have been approved, Dowlatabadi listed the timeline for key steps including recording, design, storyboarding and animatic build, production and post production over 38 weeks. She added that if the same model was to be used for a CG TV series, the upfront phase of pre-production which includes modeling, rigging and surfacing would take longer but the animation phase can become faster as the library of assets is expanded and can potentially be re-purposed for different episodes. On TV production the approved and recorded script is usually final. The storyboard artist can certainly add gags and plus a scene but he or she is bound to visualizing the script as written due to the finite budget and limited number of weeks allowed for boarding.

By contrast, Dowlatabadi described the process on a feature production where the storyboard artists are hired for their storytelling skills. With a timeline of three years for a CG theatrical feature, she shared that it is common to spend a year on finalizing the story and diving into pre-production as the core content is solidified and approved. She offered a detailed breakdown of the number of months needed for each department, how they overlap, including crew ramp ups and crew ramp downs and targeted dates to aim for recording the voice talent as the script evolves. Additionally, she included potential screening dates to test how the film is playing for its targeted audience in order to make adjustments as needed.

Collaboration with Other Studios
When partnering with another studio or studios to complete a project, Dowlatabadi recommended a list of agreed upon creative and fiscal assumptions to be compiled before the start of collaboration. The more detailed the better. From the creative perspective, the list should include an agreed upon quality of artwork and the talent team to be attached to the project. Also she added, it was important to establish what would be considered a creative retake (request for new artwork which is a departure from the script and or animatic) versus a technical retake (artwork that has errors in it such as poor animation or mistakes in compositing). From the fiscal stance, she emphasized the importance of clearly defining the scope of the work, detailing the responsibility for acquiring compatible hardware and software, credits to be assigned, production terminology, schedule, production tracking and reporting, fees, payment schedule and bonuses. Key to successful collaboration is communication and the list of assumptions helps pave the path for a well-integrated production regardless of physical proximity.

Impact of New Technology and Platforms
Dowlatabadi stated that the current demand for animated projects is practically insatiable as distributors and exhibitors aim to deliver more and more animated projects, ranging from 24 hours a day television programming, to theatrical features and content for mobile device. She added that there are new players in the mix such as Netflix and Amazon who are not only the exhibitor but also the producer and distributor. Dowlatabadi referred to these new conglomerates as 'disruptors' since their emergence is bringing about radical changes to the previously established system of production and consumption.

With the goal to produce content more efficiently and explore new looks, Dowlatabadi stated that there was a concerted effort for developing new software and hardware. She used ToonBoom to illustrate how a software program can help streamline the production process starting with storyboarding (Storyboard Pro) through delivery of final 2D animation (Harmony). According to Dowlatabadi, Storyboard Pro has enabled the storyboard artist to act more in the capacity of a mini-director as he or she not only visualizes the script but also provides rough timing, temporary music and sound. Needless to say, the boards still need to be edited and fine-tuned but the board artist is able to bring in many facets to their craft enabling better storytelling in a shorter timeline.

Additionally as the artwork is animated in Harmony, the animator can not only animate but also do the in-betweening, clean up, camera placements and color so the scene is ready for final delivery in a faster pace. As with any software, there are bugs to be ironed out and time needed for the artist to get acquainted with a new set of tools but in the long run, she has seen positive results from usage of ToonBoom at major studios and boutique animation houses.

Another technological advancement mentioned by Dowlatabadi was Real Time Animation or digital puppetry. An example of digital puppetry can be found at Super 78 Studios where they have developed a system called Gipetto. The process involves canned animation (which is a library of isolated actions such as the character spinning, waving, running etc.), the hardware and a vactor also known as a virtual actor. In this scenario, the vactor voices the character(s) as well as move them around the set thereby enabling real time interaction with a live audience. The most common use for this format is in theme parks but there are exciting plans afoot to utilize Gipetto on other platforms enabling animation to be generated in a similar fashion as a live action shoot, with the difference being the extensive upfront investment to build the canned animation library.

Animation and New Applications
As animation gets used in virtual reality and augmented reality, Dowlatabadi discussed new applications for it, such as experiential learning, virtual dating, and for medical purposes such as enabling a patient to undergo surgery without anesthesia or providing therapy for individuals suffering from post traumatic stress. She used Google as an example of a technology company that is now venturing in this arena devoting one billion dollars over the next ten years to explore VR and AR usage in retails, education, travel, medical field and entertainment. She also added Facebook to the list of companies that is investing one billion dollars in 360 development and application.

Dowlatabadi quoted data from the Annenberg Innovation Lab which predicts that there will be 5 billion Internet connected mobile devices by 2018. She believes strongly that although until recent years, the main market for animation has been television and theater, the landscape now is virtually limitless. She concluded that regardless of how the animation is to be used whether it is for Tesla looking to visualize liquid viscosity to help with their engineering plans in space or combining artwork with neuroscience to expedite healing for hospitalized children, the producers always have the same specific tasks. Regardless of the format or platform, they have to keep a close eye on all the details, budget and the schedule on a micro-level and be months ahead of the team on a macro level in order to trouble shoot whenever needed and facilitate a thriving, creative and efficient environment.

Presentation Eric Goossens

Since Anton Roebben is ill, Eric Goossens took over his task giving the presentation. He began by giving a short overview of the company Walking the Dog (WTD), which they founded together in 1999. Holland and Flanders have something in common: they both believe in animation. There has to be a passion, as well as a system to make it happen. The animation process has to be concrete, to be able to deliver something within a limited amount of time and budget. Therefore his presentation focused on the pipeline. The animation process is never easy; it is always a tough job. There is never enough budget and manpower. In Flanders there are probably not more than two or three good line producers. It takes a lot of experience. *Les Triplettes de Belleville* was the first animated feature film WTD released. The fact that it is still being shown today, shows that animated film can have a long shelf life. This also means that a good structure is important.

To compare the American situation with the European, Eric Goossens gave an overview of the production pipeline of animation studios on this continent. He took over the presentation from his co-founder of production studio Walking The Dog, Anton Roebben, who was ill. Since most European animated films are co-productions, an important part is the division of tasks between countries, which is connected with the different film funding obligations in each country. This process is so

complicated that the whole discussion about the division of tasks may take three to four months. Each country has its own expertise and rules attached to funding. To make this process easier, he hopes that in the future in Europe more enduring connections and collaborations between partners will be developed. During the production process, it is important to follow a good structure and to prepare yourself well. Do not start before the script is greenlighted. You need to make a detailed breakdown of all the props, characters, background etc. in Shotgun, a data asset management system. This is an essential tool to keep the spending of time and money under control. He regards the new developments around companies as Netflix, Amazon and Google as an evolution which can have a positive influence on the financing and distribution of animated films.

This is illustrated by two productions WTD has worked on. *Pinocchio* was the first paperless 2D-animated film. This was an artistic challenge; the artists were obliged to use the digital pen. The director was not enthusiastic by the idea, but after a test it became clear that the digital drawings were just as good as the ones on paper. This proved to be a huge saving in the amount of cost and organization. In 2012 WTD collaborated as an animation studio on *The Congress* by Ari Folman. Initially WTD was not involved, but they were asked to help out, because there were big problems with the animation. Folman asked WTD to take over a large part of this animation and to correct it in Tel Aviv. In the end they worked about ten months in Tel Aviv. Folman is now making a new animated feature film based on the diary of Anne Frank. For this 2D film WTD will be the head studio, together with the Netherlands, Luxemburg and a small part in Tel Aviv.

Division of tasks between countries
Producing films is not a very enjoyable job. It is not creative, and you have to work on very essential things, such as determining the right structure, but: the better you prepare the project and the agreements, the more enjoyable producing gets. It is important not to start too fast, and to be very cautious. Walking the Dog usually works with a budget between nine and ten million Euros, which is very low compared to the US, but the films are shown in the same theatres. It is quite hard to make a film of the same level with much less money. If we really want to make a difference, we need to have normal budgets in Europe. The pipeline is the same for everyone, but an important feature of producing animation in Europe, is the division of tasks between countries. So if you start with a coproduction, you have to find out which countries are able to carry these different tasks out. That is a very difficult job with so many specialized tasks. In Belgium there are not enough art designers who can work on a high level. Therefore we are not able to make everything in our own studio, which would be much more efficient.

In an average project, there may be four countries were involved. An unfortunate rule in film funding in Europe is that money cannot travel, so all the countries involved have to account for their expenses within their own borders. All the countries have different funds with their own rules attached to them. Within the countries the work is often divided as well, between different cities. Therefore it is absolutely necessary to make an overview of the task division. Many things you can balance. The feature *Jack et la mécanique du cœur* (2013) turned out to be a very enjoyable collaboration. Next to WTD there was only one other production company involved, EuropaCorp. The financing is the starting point, so you have to ask each partner: how much money can your country bring in? The discussion about the task division in a co-production where four countries were involved, can take three to four months. It would be a good thing for Europe to develop more enduring connections and collaborations between partners. You would then be able to work with partners you already know and trust. It saves the time it takes for the explorative phase and you can concentrate on the division of tasks.

Financing the storyboard and the animatic
We always register the division of tasks for every project. This is an obligation. It sounds childish, but you have to register everything in advance, because there is always someone who doesn't follow the agreements. There are still people who don't know that you have to do the breakdown on the basis

of the animatic. To avoid budgetary surprises, it is important to finance the storyboard and the animatic in the pre-production phase. *Pinocchio* was a small disaster, because there was a budget increase of 750.000 Euros even before starting the production, because the storyboard existed of 3.9 instead of the expected 1.7 characters per second. The animatic is a great thing. If the animatic is good, than not much can go wrong anymore. Therefore, it is advisable to spend much time and energy on this. For a feature film storyboard, you need about four to five storyboard artists working for six months. On the basis of this storyboard, you can make a good animatic.

Furthermore, the naming convention is of key importance. An average European feature film consists of 70- 90 sequences and 1200-1500 shots. So this should be named correctly in the pipeline: reel-sequence-shot. Working in reels has the advantage that you know in which reel you are working. When you have completed a reel, color grading and sound effects can be kicked off for this part. Working per sequence instead of per reel causes delay and stressful situations at the post-production department. When you are working with a data asset management system, the exact naming of reels, sequences and shots is an obligation.

Many companies are working with Shotgun. This is a data asset management system which divides everything in sequences and shots. You need to fill in the status of each shot. If for example the layout is validated, it cannot be changed anymore. The system resembles a Big Brother; you can see exactly how long someone has worked on one shot. You can generate statistics with it and shows the status of a project in one glance. The artists were initially not so enthusiastic about this system, but now they are used to it. It seems complicated in the beginning, but this proved to be a must-have in animation co-productions. It would be a good idea if in Europe only this system or a few other systems would be used, with which everybody works.

Production breakdown
For all the different breakdowns for props, background, matte painting etc, you need a specialist instead of a line producer. Decide which key shots you will use as a reference. When these have been approved, you can pass them to the other team so that they can work in the same style. There is a shortage of VFX specialists in the Netherlands and Belgium. You want to choose people with the right expertise, for example in making water or fire. When the animatic is completed, you can start with the design. Walking the Dog pays for animation per approved second. This method of paying is not allowed in some countries, but it does work. The artists can divide their own time.

It is important to make a very detailed breakdown, in which all the props, characters, background, etc. are included. If you cannot make such a breakdown, it is better not to work in animation, because you are taking too much risks. With this breakdown you are well prepared and will be much better able to keep your production and spending under control. The line producer manages this breakdown; he is the colonel of the animated film. This is an indispensable person for any animation production. You need two production managers for a team of thirty-five animators.

In respond to what Dowlatabadi mentioned about the developments around new companies such as Netflix and Amazon, he thinks this is an evolution which should be encouraged. Sergio Pablos, the artist behind *Despicable Me*, has now made *Klaus*, a European animation film of around 30 million Euros which is exclusively financed by Netflix. *Sahara*, a 2D feature which is produced in France and was a big success, was bought by Netflix for worldwide distribution. If we deal with these developments in a good way, a bright future awaits for animated productions in Europe.

Panel discussion

The following issues were discussed:

Question: How do you balance the time and budget needed for creativity and also hit your delivery dates? ~~The balance between creative and production reality~~
Zahra: It is critical that the producer and director are completely in sync and that they are fully cognizant of how to take full advantage of the available resources. They also have to agree on where compromises must be made. The schedule is rigid but within it there are possibilities. If there are critical problems, a creative producer can be fluid and find solutions. If the director however is focused on miniscule details that don't impact the telling of the story that is where the producer has to impress upon the director to keep prioritizing his or her tasks so an on time delivery can be made.
Eric: The film *Klaus* exemplifies this. This was the first time Netflix was fully financing a European animated film, so it was more about the contract, the delivery etc. They were not ready to say: 'We have a team and then we will supervise you.' In the beginning there has to be a basis of trust.
Zahra: There has to be trust and a shared vision. You have to find the right team.
Eric: It is important not to start too early, with a not-greenlighted script. The moment you say: this is greenlighted, you cannot change too much anymore. If an animation is finished, you cannot throw away so much of it. Of course your visions change during the process of filmmaking. But it is important to change sequences only if it is really necessary. At a certain moment you have to decide. At the first screening of a shot, the discussion is still very open-ended. All remarks are welcome and being collected. The next day the shot is screened again with all the corrections. Conflict is good, and a good director is welcoming other ideas. The third time he is again coming back with corrections. Normally after this, the shot has to be approved. The maximum is seven retakes, but it is not good for the team spirit to retake so many times.
Eric: All the co-producers have their own network reading the script. Before they are greenlit, television series are always tested with an audience. With the script, testing for an audience is more difficult. You can test this with the animatic. When we tested the animatic of *Pinocchio*, the director was not accepting any comments. So at the end we could not change the animatic, although it was not good. This was a big problem. We learned that you never should accept directors who are asking for the final cut rights from the beginning.

Question: How do you gauge time management on a production?
Eric: I remember a production in which the studio was filled with people, who were working for six months on the same sequence. I stopped the production after seven months, because it was not going well, but I should have taken this decision much earlier.
Zahra: In the US, the whole development stage is substantially longer, and you do throw things away, but the budget gives more opportunities for that.
Eric: Project management is a part of every job. You can ask any animator how many approved seconds he can do in one week, and trust him on that. A high level CGI-animator can make three to four approved seconds in a week. Sometimes top level animators can only do two seconds.

Question: Having worked on many live action projects, I just completed my first animated short. I found that directing animation gave me time to think about every scene. How would you compare the two?
Eric: There are more competent line producers in Europe for live action than there are for animation films.
Camiel Schouwenaar, a director who makes both live action and animated films: When you are shooting live action, shooting is the most stressful part for the director. In animation you have much more time to really direct your material. This turned out to be a big surprise and an advantage for me.

Question: What is preferable having one director or two?
Eric: It is good to have a dual directorship, where one director is focusing on animation, and the other

is focusing on the image. It is expensive but it really works well and pays off.

Zahra: In the US, it is often the case to have two directors helming a feature, but it really depends on the studio. The director has to be able to energize the team. Brad Bird was the only director on *Iron Giant* and he enabled his team to feel invested and passionate about their work. If the director is not charismatic like Brad Bird, then it's up to us as producers to create that atmosphere with the team so everyone is eager to contribute their best and thereby facilitate the realization of the director's vision.

Question: Once you sell your pitch, how can you be part of the team to develop the concept further?
Zahra: If a company is interested in your idea, they will walk you through the steps. Depending on your expertise and experience level, they will evaluate how to best fit you on the team. Don't be disappointed if you are not placed in a leadership position such as a director or a producer. Getting a foot in the door and having the opportunity to learn how a studio works are key first steps to a successful career.

Tom: It also happened at Annecy that there was a good pitch by a writer who was inexperienced in production. Disney was interested, but gave the names of some other companies, and advised him to go and speak to them. Disney said: "If you find a way to work with them, it becomes easier for us to work with you." If you get positive feedback, most people will make it clear what stands in the way to say yes to you.

Eric: The next step is to check the availability of the producer you want to work with. Besides this, it is advisable to look further than only at the conventional production houses.

Question: Once a pitch has been accepted, would you prefer a treatment or a completed script?
Zahra: I often find that it's best to start with the initial concept material and develop the script together as there are many creative issues that are studio or brand specific that may need to be blended in. Sometimes writers can be inflexible. Since they have spent so much time writing the script they are unable to make a final sale or join the development team because our objectives don't match up.

Eric: I prefer to get a completed script beforehand. There is an example of a script fully developed by a director and scriptwriter. They didn't approach the producer at the moment before they really thought it was OK. Then everything went really fast and they could choose between two top-producers and three sales agents, because it was a very good script. In animation the last ten years the quality of scripts is rising, but there were a lot of bad scripts in the past.

Tom: Some pieces of content are aimed at a very local market, and that's fine as long as you use a funding model that is set up for that purpose. It becomes more problematic when people have the ambition to take a project, that has some limitations, further. There can be an opportunity to work on those projects, but unless you like the core idea, there is no point in working on developing ~~evolving~~ it. A smart procedure is to present a good treatment, instead of working too long on a script beforehand. Every input you get, helps to develop a perspective.