

Film festivals and film distribution networks: cultural policies and the case of the Annecy International Animation Film Festival

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Keywords: Film festivals, film distribution, cultural policy, film history, animation industry

Abstract:

This paper examines the historical transformation of the Annecy International Animation Film Festival from a cinephile-oriented showcase into a key industry event within the global animation sector. The festival is understood here as a site of mediation concerning both the artistic value and the political economy of animation works, as well as the “cultural production and cultural policy” (STRINGER, J. 2001, p. 136) of animation cinema.

Drawing on Marijke de Valck’s (2007) conceptualization of film festivals as mediating institutions within transnational cinema, Thomas Elsaesser’s (2005) assessment of festivals’ capacity to set agendas and generate value, and the framing of Annecy as a “field-configuring event” (RÜLING, 2009), the paper argues that Annecy’s transformation reflects a broader reconfiguration of the festival circuit into an increasingly industrialized and structured network of stakeholders.

Originally conceived as a specialized event privileging short films and aesthetic innovation, Annecy positioned itself through an “anti-Cannes” and “anti-Disney” stance (RÜLING, 2009), highlighting “a movement of filmmakers that favored the artistic character of cinema, image by image” (PUTHOD, 2015, p. 23). According to sociologist Cécile Noesser, this generation of animation pioneers contributed to the “Public recognition (in the broad sense, encompassing both audiences and public authorities) that animation cinema is the work passionate amateurs and audiences who are primarily interested in the thorny issue of their distribution” (2016, p. 37).

Today, data from the European Audiovisual Observatory points to a significantly expanded animation industry in Europe, with the region accounting for 24% of global animation theatrical admissions (EDMERY, 2025, p. 27) and 32% of all commercially released animation films (EDMERY, 2025, p. 18). At the same time, recent figures from Annecy indicate its growing attendance, with 17,400 accredited badge holders and 125,000 total visitors recorded in 2024 (DALTON, 2025).

Noesser argues that such changes to the European animation industry begins in France during the early 1980s, with a radical transformation of the animation landscape into a market regulated by the state (2016, p. 93-142). Parallel to this process of industrialization, Annecy itself underwent significant institutional changes, including the relocation of its headquarters from Paris to Annecy in 1983, the creation of MIFA (*Marché International du Film d’Animation*) and the introduction of a feature film competition in 1985, the transition to an annual event in 1998, and the establishment of CITIA as its governing body in 2006.

Building on film festival theory, the historiography of Annecy, cultural policy analysis, and an extensive mapping of selected films presented in the official competition between 2005 and 2025, this paper argues that the festival has become a key component of the international animation distribution value chain, operating as a site of cultural legitimization within the global animation industry ecosystem

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