



- National Film Centre of Latvia
- Latvian Animation Association

Latvian Animation



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One small Latvia and seven full-length animated films

We are a small superpower when it comes to animation, known around the world for our visual narrative style and animation auteurs. With this publication, our aim is to tell a bit more about what Latvian animation is like today and how we reached this point.

We have seen the premiere of almost 70 animated

films over the past decade. Only three of those films were full-length, but the situation is rapidly changing. In the very near future seven Latvian full-length animated films will be released, which is more than in all of Latvia's film history taken together.

Every year, at least one Latvian animated film takes part in the competition at animation festivals of various size all around the world, and that's a great indicator for a country with a population of only two million, especially considering the relatively small number of films that are made (an average of five short films a year). The solitary Latvian mentality seems to have led to a relatively large number of so-called "one-director studios", where the director is often also the producer – this is the way Vladimirs Leščovs, Jurgis Krāsons, Gints Zilbalodis, Anete Melece and Kārlis Vītols work. Currently, the *Atom Art*, *Animācijas Brigāde* and *Rija* studios are active and inviting a variety of directors to work with them. *Locomotive Productions*, which is known as a powerful producer of feature films and documentaries, has also recently joined the field of animation. In addition, Latvia has independent directors, such as Nils Skapāns, who work with a new producer for every project.

Latvian animated films are made with small and medium-sized budgets. Studios are fully producing local films but also offering animation services

to others; many projects, both in short and long formats, are made as co-productions. We can reassure colleagues from other countries that this is definitely the right time to look for good-quality services in Latvia, because, thanks to the seven aforementioned full-length films, there is now a considerable number of trained professionals in the country. However, provision of services is not the main goal for Latvia; this is, after all, a country of auteur animation.

Latvia's special style in animation appeared already in the 1960s and has gradually developed since then. The first artistically courageous projects in children's cinema, created in the cut-out technique, brought an awareness of auteur animation to Latvian audiences, preparing local viewers for untamed visual styles. Puppet animation also continues to forge a stable and nowadays quite unique path with its handmade puppets. The development of drawn animation, for its part, has relied in large part on engaging established painters and graphic artists for the creation of visual identities for films.

Ironically, the lack of local educational opportunities has been advantageous for the cultivation of the specific character and visual qualities of Latvian animation. Most of our directors have received traditional educations in art; the first higher education programme specialising in animation was established only in 2013 at the Art Academy of Latvia. Today, animation can be studied as an audio-visual art technique at the secondary and vocational level at six educational institutions in Latvia.

All signs point to the fact that Latvian animation is still just gathering speed. And this process has also just received an energetic "roof": the Latvian Animation Association was founded in 2016 and currently has 17 members (studios as well as individuals). Its director, Anna Zača, is the first eastern European to have been elected to the board of the European Animation Awards Association, which presents the Emile Awards. In the future, animation delegations from Latvia will be seen more and more often at international festivals and film industry events. ■

Every year, at least one Latvian animated film takes part in the competition at animation festivals of various size all around the world, and that's a great indicator for a country with a population of only two million.

Anna Zača



Photo: Agnese Zeltiņa



Animation for children – one type of animation

Before the Day Breaks

After seeing Edmunds Jansons' Christmas film *Pigtail and Mr. Sleeplessness* / *Bize un Neguļa* (2017), the adults in the lobby confess to one another that this animated film for preschool-age children brought tears to their own eyes. But there is much here to satisfy the adult eye: successful teamwork on the part of the filmmakers, a sincere story by screenwriter Lote Eglīte, and Jansons' precise directing, which has left plenty of freedom for artist Reinis Pētersons' visual characters to work their magic. As a result, the film flows briskly and addresses the

child in every viewer with its simple and unpretentious manner. It brings them back to a time when they were small but the mailboxes were unbearably high, the ice-skating rink was huge, their own steps were unsure, and so many strange, new experiences still lay ahead.

One of the film's greatest values is its ability to convince viewers that the filmmakers truly care about children. The long-awaited feeling of happiness produced by the sensitivity of *Pigtail and Mr. Sleeplessness* confirms that children's animation in Latvia has only recently regained that chord of sincerity

that flourished in the field during the Soviet era. *Pigtail and Mr. Sleeplessness* calls to mind the classics of Latvian animation and reminds audiences of its strong points: a familiar environment and rhythm, vivid scenarios and a sincere outlook on life.

The making of professional animated films in Latvia began with animation for children. For Soviet-era directors Arnolds Burovs, Roze Stiebra and Ansis Bērziņš, animation was a way to remain genuine and present their own world view, encoded in a very imaginative, pictorial language and at once thoughtful towards its viewer – the child. Animation was also a way in which to avoid ideological pressure. "I think that the decision to make children's films took place beyond my conscious will," says Stiebra, the grandmother of Latvian drawn animation. "Definitely. I did not set out to make films for children and devote my whole life to this endeavour. But the conditions were favourable. Censorship was very strict; those were very difficult years," she continues. The Soviet regime strived to centralise and Russify all cultural content, and therefore animation was a way in which – quietly and calmly, through stories and Latvian literature – to preserve that part of the nation's identity that is rooted in language, folklore and a sense of belonging to this land.

During the Soviet era, almost all of Latvian animation was done with children in mind. Films for adults were rare, and only amateur filmmakers who did not rely on funding from Moscow could afford to make them. After the restoration of Latvian independence, animation for adults was therefore a relatively unexplored field that naturally attracted both young and old filmmakers alike. Once-ubiquitous animation for children evolved into only one of several types of animation, albeit specialised and of high quality. Most importantly, though, Latvian filmmakers still continue to make animated children's films that adults also find touching and heart-warming. Stiebra's newest film, *Before the Day Breaks* / *Saule brauca debesīs* (2018), an epic based on motifs from Latvian folk songs and included in the film programme dedicated to Latvia's centenary, is just such a film. ■

Poet, editor and publisher of children's literature Inese Zandere:

Roze Stiebra's animation – in fact, her whole identity, as she often stresses – is rooted in Latvian literature and folklore and the tone and moral messages found therein. "Folk song is all around me: in my mind, in my heart, everywhere I go, everything I touch, hear, see or feel," she writes. I believe that her films based on the work of classic Latvian authors such as Rainis, Aspazija, Vilis Plūdons, Imants Ziedonis, Kārlis Skalbe and others form a vital, democratic literary canon that is familiar to children. Stiebra is the most successful messenger of literature, one who has managed to keep classic Latvian cultural values alive both in the Soviet era and in today's neo-capitalistic world.

But the most interesting thing is that, already when choosing the primary literary sources for her films, she conquered the imagined distinction between films meant for children and films meant for adults. Our literary classics, and especially our folk songs with their rituals that help to bring structure to the world, are not children's literature in the narrow sense of the concept. Instead, they are literature that unites the child and the adult. The same can be said of Stiebra's animation. ■



Before the Day Breaks

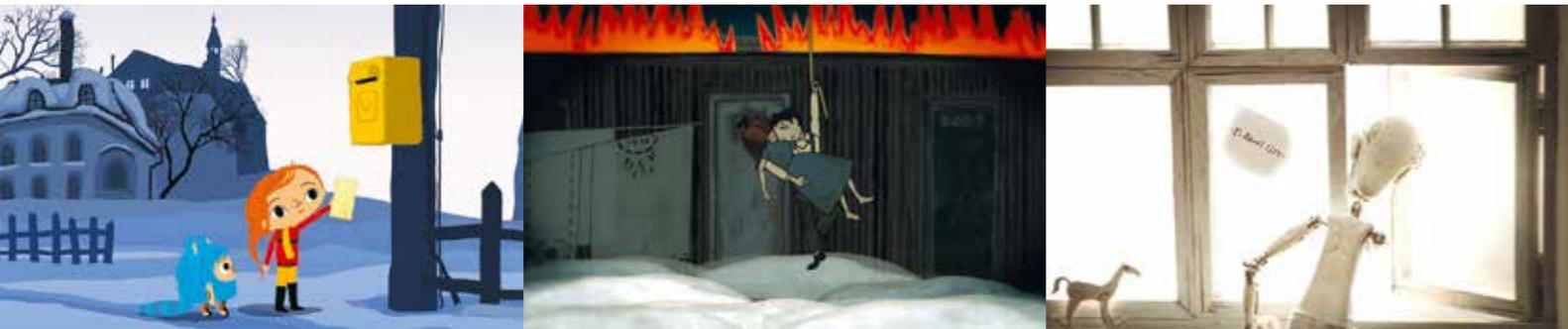
Atom Art

Atom Art is an award-winning 2D animation studio established in 2001 and based in Riga, Latvia. Over the years, it has grown from a four-to five-person animation studio to a company with more than 30 people on its staff. However, the main team has stayed the same. Atom Art is known for its auteur short films and animated films for children.

The studio works in a variety of animation genres: magical realism, animated documentary, musical, absurd, children's film and others. The studio mainly

works in the computer cut-out animation technique, but films are also made by traditional drawing, drawing on glass, sand animation, animation with charcoal and even puppet animation.

Currently, Atom Art is involved in two co-productions: as the lead producer (with Letko, Poland) for the animated feature film *Jacob, Mimmi and the Talking Dogs* and as the minority producer for the animated short *Riga's Lilac* (with Papy 3D, France) (see pg. 31, Lizete Upīte).



Pigtail and Mr. Sleeplessness

Springtime on Crow Street

It's About Time

The Atom Art studio is led by producer Sabīne Andersone and director Edmunds Jansons. The studio's third core member is the lead animator Mārtiņš Dūmiņš. Creative decisions are made as a team. Although the presence of the producer and creative director are a ubiquitous part of any film made at Atom Art, invited directors are nevertheless given much creative freedom.

The studio began working with auteur animated short films, first of all Jansons' own films but later also involving artist Reinis Pētersons, Ivo Briedis, Lizete Upīte and Zane Oborenko. Atom Art is now

able to support itself by fully devoting itself to auteur animated films, a point it has reached after many years of trying to balance between short films and various commercial projects.

Edmunds Jansons: "I sometimes compare our studio to the situation with Icelandic music. There was a distinct 'boom' about ten years ago or so when Icelandic groups became super popular, and people asked them how they did it. So art-housey, doing such totally crazy, nutty things... And they replied: we just came to the realisation that there was absolutely no point in being commercial, because we simply aren't



Edmunds Jansons is the founder of the Atom Art studio and an award-winning director. He also works as an animator, graphic artist, editor and creative producer, and in his free time he enjoys illustrating children's books.



Sabīne Andersone is the CEO of the company and the main producer for all the important projects at Atom Art. Although she is the main financial manager, she is one of the most creative people at Atom Art.



Mārtiņš Dūmiņš is the lead animator and animation supervisor at Atom Art. Over the years, he and Edmunds Jansons have developed a unique cut-out animation style that serves as the brand of Atom Art in Latvia and abroad.



Ieva Vaickovska is the production manager of film projects at Atom Art and also the manager of all kinds of other projects at the studio. She is the right hand of the producers and directors.



Ģirts Bišs is the sound director for most of Atom Art's films. For some films he has also composed music and has been quite successful at that, having received many national and international awards for his work.



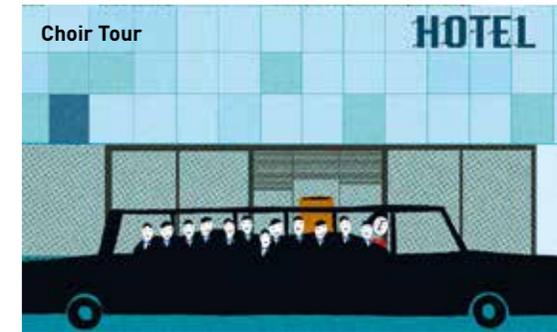
Reinis Pētersons is an illustrator and artist who works in diverse styles. He has created the design for the studio's children's films as well as his own short animation film, *Ursus*, made in a delicate charcoal-drawing technique.



Elīna Brasliņa is a talented artist and book illustrator who has collaborated with Atom Art on a feature film. This collaboration continues with the development of their next feature film together.



Lizete Upīte is a young and ambitious animation film director and artist who, after graduating from La Poudrière animation school, joined Atom Art to work on her own films.



Choir Tour

capable of doing commerce! I don't think any attempts by Atom Art to become commercial would work either, because we don't have that kind of taste here at the studio. But, by doing what you know best, you eventually realise that that's even more profitable than trying to be commercial. Over time, the small auteur films put out by our studio bring in a lot more, in terms of satisfaction and sometimes even financially, because they continue to be shown."

The studio's second direction of activity is making children's animated films. In all, Atom Art has three children's projects: the *Shammies* series, the short film

Pigtail and Mr. Sleeplessness and the *Jacob, Mimmi and the Talking Dogs* feature-length film.

"We see children's cinema as a dialogue that you have to form with a great sense of responsibility and truly believing in what you do, because it influences the taste of the young generation. As we work, we keep in mind that we are parents ourselves and want to create something our children will enjoy. At the present moment, we're seeing that there's no limit for films made with such an approach; they're appreciated all over the world." (Sabīne Andersone and Edmunds Jansons)



Shammies



Ursus



Most-significant films:

Pigtail and Mr. Sleeplessness / Bize un Neguļa

Edmunds Jansons, digital cut-outs, 2D computer animation, 25 min, 2017, Latvia, children, dialogue in Latvian / English

- To win back her parents' attention, a six-year-old girl nicknamed Pigtail and her imaginary friend Mr. Sleeplessness come up with a clever plan to send her Baby Brother and Grandma to the moon.

It's About Time / Laiks iet

Ivo Briedis, puppet animation, 6 min, 2015, Latvia, adults, no dialogue

- A message brought by the wind urges a lonely man to go out into the city, but there is someone who does not want him to leave the room.

Miniseries Shammies / Lupatiņi

Edmunds Jansons, digital cut-outs, 2015, Latvia, preschool-aged children, dialogue in English / Latvian

- The Shammies are an animated cross-media project for preschool-aged children about discovering the world based on children's games, fantasy and word play. The project consists of TV series, web episodes and a published calendar and books.

Choir Tour / Kora turneja

Edmunds Jansons, 2D computer animation, 5 min, 2012, Latvia, all audiences, no dialogue

- A world-famous boys' choir goes on tour. In the hands of their severe conductor, they are an obedient musical instrument. But left alone without supervision, they are just playful children. While in Seoul, the conductor is accidentally trapped in an elevator, and the boys are left alone.

Ursus

Reinis Pētersons, charcoal drawing, 10 min, 2011, Latvia, adults, no dialogue

- A charcoal-on-paper animation about a motorcycling circus bear who decides to leave the daily routine and takes off to the forest, where his true happiness seems to dwell.

Springtime on Crow Street / Pavasaris Vārnu ielā

Edmunds Jansons, paper cut-outs, 23 min, 2009, Latvia, children's film, dialogue in Latvian

- Springtime on Crow Street is a musical story about love, honour and forgiveness. Janka, a suburban lad from Riga, dreams that he saves Zelma from a fire and gets decorated with a medal. Will he be courageous enough to stand up for his love in the eyes of everyone in the yard and park, where the band of kids from the neighbouring street are lurking?

Coming Soon:

Jacob, Mimmi and the Talking Dogs /

Jākabs, Mimmi un runājošie suņi

Edmunds Jansons, Cut-Out, 2D Computer Animation 70 min, 2019, universal audiences, with dialogues

- Adventure story about two kids who spend summer in city suburb, where together with talking dogs they rescue the romantic wooden-house neighborhood from reconstruction.



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We think and work internationally

Atom Art produces films not only on a local level but also on a European and global level. Participation in international industry forums plays a very important role in the studio's development. *Atom Art* tries to appear at Cartoon Forum, Cartoon Movie and CEE Forum every year – such activities influence and cultivate the studio's

competitiveness on the national as well as international stage. The studio directors, for their part, keep current by actively watching the newest animated films at film festivals around the world. “We follow current events and trends in film because it's inspiring – if you see that you don't need to pander to anything, then you become more courageous in your creative expression,” says Sabīne Andersone.



***Jacob, Mimmi and the Talking Dogs* is a film for the whole family based on the book by award-winning author Luīze Pastore. It's a summer adventure story that takes place in the Riga suburb of Maskačka. Jacob, a boy from central Riga, arrives to spend the summer with his relatives on the outskirts of the city.**



Edmunds Jansons

Edmunds Jansons about working on the film:

This is my first feature-length film, but the team consists of almost the same people I've been working with for years on short films. I think the main difference with feature-length films is related to distribution – the

formats and requirements are completely different. The way in which a film reaches the viewer through a movie theatre's repertoire is much simpler than it is for short films.

Jacob and Mimmi... is a family film, a children's film, and that means it's not really auteuristic experimentation in which I wander off on my own

artistic endeavours and do only things I'm interested in myself. For example, short films, on the other hand, are interesting for viewers precisely because the best of them are complete auteur cinema, even exotic in a way – another person is expressing him- or herself, and I'm able to observe what that looks like. Whereas the full-length format demands that I know how it works, how viewers will respond to it. My goal is not to entertain, or *only* to entertain; it's important for me to understand my audience. If this type of film does not lead to emotional teamwork with the audience – no matter whether it's a sigh, laughter or tears – then, I believe, it doesn't work. A film must resonate. ■



Rija Films

The *Rija* film studio was established in 1995; its main activities are film production, the dubbing of animated films, and film distribution. To date, its films have been made by 19 different directors, including Inga Riba (Praulīņa), Vladimirs Leščovs, Signe Baumannē, Jurgis Krāsons, Reinis Kalnaellis, Aija Bley, Askolds Saulītis and Agnese Aizpuriete.

Rija's first animated film, *Little Devils / Velniņi*, was released in 1999. Before that, however, the studio had already amassed considerable experience by doing animation for French director Michel Ocelot's film *Kirikou and the Sorceress / Kirikou et la Sorcière*, which went on to win ten international prizes. The global attention *Rija* received also led to a significant role for the studio in a French, Great Britain, Belgium

and Canada feature-length co-production, the Oscar-nominated film *Belleville Rendez-vous / Les Triplettes de Belleville* (2003).

Rija has had many highlights in its 23 years of work: the shorts *To Swallow a Toad / Norīt krupi* (dir. Jurgis Krāsons, 2010), *When Apples Roll / Kad āboli ripo* (dir. Reinis Kalnaellis,) and *Singing Hugo and his Incredible Adventures / Dziedošais Hugo un viņa neticamie piedzīvojumi* (dir. Reinis Kalnaellis, 2010) premiered at the prestigious Cannes and Berlin film festivals and also won awards at several other international festivals. *Rija's* short film *Funny Alphabet / Joka pēc alfabēts* (dir. Reinis Kalnaellis, 2010), script and art by Indra Sprōģe, music by well-known Latvian musician Renārs Kaupers) has become very popular, with almost 13 million views on YouTube. ▶



Lote from Gadgetville



Apple Pie Lullaby

For many years now, *Rija* has been actively participating in co-productions. According to director Vilnis Kalnaellis, the studio first develops a project and then attracts co-producers, selecting them based on their experience and previous work. One significant project was the feature-length film *Lotte from Gadgetville* (2006), which was made in collaboration with the Estonian company *Eesti Joonisfilm*. A second feature-length film with the Lotte character was released in 2011, and a third *Lotte and the Lost Dragons* will come out in 2019, premiering in the Generation competition at the Berlinale.

Rija specialises in classic animation technique, in which a team of professionals bring to life the ideas of a director and/or artist. The forthcoming film *Apple Pie Lullaby / Ābolrauša šūpuļdziesma* is being created using the *Maya* 3D programme, with a 2D version developed later for the film's composition and colourisation. Last year, *Rija* worked on two feature-length animated films, one short and one documentary. The studio has 25 employees working with animated films. ■



Lotte and the Lost Dragons



The Golden Horse

Most-significant films:

Sieviete / The Woman

Signe Baumane, classic animation, 10 min, 2002, adults, no dialogues

- A visually poetic story about a woman's creation, her setting out into the world and her ability to bring man either Love or Death.

Joka pēc alfabēts / Funny Alphabet

Reinis Kalnaellis, classic animation, 3 min, 2015, children, lyrics

- A short and witty story featuring the adventures of various animals in alphabetical order. With a fun song and entertaining characters, it helps children learn the Latvian alphabet.



The Woman



Singing Hugo and his Incredible Adventures



Crazy Fox

Animation services:

Les Triplettes de Belleville / Belleville Rendez-vous

Sylvain Chomet, classic animation, 77 min, 2003, France / Belgium / Great Britain / Canada, U, no dialogues

- Nominated for two Academy Awards (Oscars) in 2004, for best animated feature and best original song.

Kirikou et la Sorcière / Kirikou and the Sorceress

Michel Ocelot, classic animation, 71 min, 1998, France / Luxembourg, children, dialogues

Coming soon:

Trakā lapsa / Crazy Fox

Agnese Aizpuriete, classic animation, 7 min, 2019, children, no dialogues

- Crazy Fox has wandered into a seaside village, where she experiences all sorts of unusual and alarming things: she saves a snail, eats too many pears, jumps around on a trampoline and becomes friends with a mermaid by helping her to escape from an aquarium.

Lote un pazudušie pūķi / Lotte and the Lost Dragons

Janno Poldma & Heiki Ernits, classic animation, 72 min, 2019, Estonia / Latvia, children, dialogues

- Karl the Raccoon and Victor Vetch are two scientists who have arrived in Gadgetville and have decided to take part in a local competition for who can collect the most folk songs. They dream of recording the song of the mythical fire-breathing dragon. Lotte and her little sister hear of their plan and decide to help the scientists.

Ābolrauša šūpuļdziesma / Apple Pie Lullaby

Reinis Kalnaellis, classic animation, 65 min, 2020, children, dialogues

- A film about the little penguin girl Telma, who worries that her fifth Birthday will not find its way to her house and she will forever remain four years old. She is joined in her adventures in the Land of Ice and the Great Forest by the cat Wilhelm, the mouse Sophia, the king of seagulls Stefan, the zebra couple Teo and Mare with their smartphones, and other inhabitants of the magical land.



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Animācijas Brigāde

For the love of puppets

Director Jānis Cimmermanis and human orchestra (as well as scriptwriter, producer, artist, even composer) Māris Putniņš have been making puppet films together for more than 30 years. They have become so attuned to each other that they almost have no need for words when working. “Often we’ll begin making a film,” says Putniņš, his elbow resting comfortably on his knee, “and a great solution simply appears. Who thought it up?” He looks over at Cimmermanis, who is resting against the table, his arms crossed. “Who the hell knows,” he replies puckishly and lifts an eyebrow above the frame of his glasses.



Hedgehogs and the City



Māris Putniņš and Jānis Cimmermanis

Since the mid-1960s, when the Riga Film Studio established a puppet department, the group working there has been very close. Generations have come and gone; the appearance of the puppets and the roles of the filmmakers themselves have changed; political systems, sources of funding and the film industry have also changed. Over the years, hundreds of puppets and decorations have been filmed: rabbits, dogs, big noses from the *Rescue Team* (Avārijas Brigāde) series, all painstakingly hand-made. At the present moment, the studio employs 16 professionals in the field of puppets on a number of different projects taking place simultaneously.

The *Rescue Team* films have participated in a variety of international film festivals and have won prestigious prizes, including the Crystal Bear children’s jury award at the Berlin International Film Festival in 1995 for the film *Let’s Fly* (Lidojam, from the Munk and Lemmy series directed by Nils Skapāns). Another successful animation short is *Hedgehogs and the City* (Eži un lielpilsēta, 2013) by Ēvalds Lācis, which has received ten awards at international film festivals.

The studio’s film scripts are mostly original; some are based on Latvian or foreign literature and comic strips. The studio is mostly recognised for its five- to ten-minute-long children’s shorts without dialogue.

“Does the script come first?” I ask Putniņš and Cimmermanis. “First is a crazy idea,” laughs Cimmermanis. Audacious, absurd, a bit wild, crazy – that’s what puppet people are like. ■



Cock-a-doodle-doo!



Bimini



The Latvian



Let's Fly

Most-significant films:

Ki-ke-ri-gū! / Cock-a-doodle-doo!

Arnolds Burovs, puppet animation, 10 min, 1966, children, no dialogues

■ This, the first Latvian puppet animation film, is based on motifs from folk tales and tells about a poor farmer with a magical mill. When the rich master steals the mill, the farmer’s dog and rooster prepare for battle.

Bimini

Arnolds Burovs, puppet animation, 19 min, 1981, universal, no dialogues

■ Based on Heinrich Heine’s poem, this film traces humanity’s longing for beauty and fulfilment, as expressed through a song about the legendary island of Bimini and its magical well whose waters revive a person’s strength and youth.

Pieminekļis / Monument

Jānis Cimmermanis, puppet animation, 5 min, 1991, universal, no dialogues

■ Every Soviet city of importance had one – a monument to the Communist leader Lenin. Here, the filmmakers use a monument that does not hold together as a metaphor for the collapsing Soviet Union.

Lidojam / Let’s Fly (from the Munk and Lemmy series)

Nils Skapāns, puppet animation, 6 min, 1994, children, no dialogues

■ The strange creatures Munk and Lemmy encounter very human problems and attempts at solving them. Here, they try to help their friend the rabbit, who is unable to reach the fruit he desires.

Latvietis / The Latvian

Jānis Cimmermanis, puppet animation, 9 min, 2007, universal, no dialogues

■ One-of-a-kind evidence for filmmaking’s power – all of Latvian history is cleverly presented in a matter of nine minutes. The vivid detail, iconic symbols, events and melodies from various historical eras immediately evoke whole decades and even entire centuries, while at the same time evaluating (with a healthy dose of self-irony) the Latvian’s ability (or inability) to influence the course of history.

Eži un lielpilsēta / Hedgehogs and the City

Ēvalds Lācis, puppet animation, 10 min, 2013, children, no dialogues

■ One spring morning, the animals wake up from their winter slumber to find that a city has replaced their forest. They realise they will need to find new strategies for surviving, and it turns out that the hedgehogs take to capitalism quite naturally.



Māris Putniņš

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Dace Rīdūze

Dace Rīdūze has studied theatre arts, theatre directing and pedagogy. She began working with animation in 1998 when she joined the *Animācijas Brigāde* film studio, where she learned about puppet cinema from the very foundations up. Her film *Up and Down / Kaimiņu būšana* (2000) received the “Lielais Kristaps” Latvian national film award for best debut, and the experience inspired her to continue creating films. Rīdūze’s films *Firefly / Jāntārpiņš* (2002), *Acorn Boy / Zīlūks* (2010) and *Little Ruddy / Sārtulis* (2014) have taken part in the competition at the Berlin

Film Festival. Her 13th and most recent film, *Dusty / Puteklis*, will be released in 2019. Rīdūze is already working on her next short, *Peasants / Zirņa bērni*.

Much of Rīdūze’s work has been inspired by classic Latvian literature, which has not lost its currency in terms of either content or visual values. The characters created by famous illustrator Margarita Stāraste are particular favourites of hers: “In Stāraste’s work I find my Latvian ‘code’, the one I grew up with. Now my children see it as well, and I hope that, in the film format, it will reach yet another generation.”

After 20 years in puppet animation, Rīdūze still finds ways to develop her technique and experiment. For example, a real boy appears alongside the puppets in her newest film, *Dusty*. “In puppet animation, I can be the director, scenographer, set decorator, actor and tricks master all at the same time,” says Rīdūze. “I get excited by the feeling you get when crossing the fragile boundary between the real world and the invisible universe of fantasy.” ■



Dusty



Firefly



Peasants

Most-significant films:

Up and Down / Kaimiņu būšana

Puppet animation, 7 min, 2000, children, no dialogues

■ Strange things are happening at the Tiger’s garden. Someone has stolen his carrots and some of the carrots are growing “up and down”

Firefly / Jāntārpiņš

Puppet animation, 12 min, 2002, children, no dialogues

■ Otis the Firefly is trying to find a girlfriend, but due to his inability to glow, he is finding this difficult.

Acorn Boy / Zīlūks

Puppet animation, 10 min, 2010, children, no dialogues

■ The adventures of a little acorn boy in the village of stalks where he meets Mrs Bee, Mr Spider, the ants and many other insects.

Little Ruddy / Sārtulis

Puppet animation, 9 min, 2014, children, no dialogues

■ The coloured pencils are a merry lot. One day, red Ruddy comes out of the pencil case too late and unsharpened. An annoying fly causes him to fall out of the window into the garden. Finding himself in a new world, Ruddy tries to make himself useful, but it seems he’s not wanted anywhere.

Coming soon:

Dusty / Puteklis

Puppet animation, 13 min, 2019, children

■ The story about a piece of dust living in a book shelf and its unusual friendship with a boy.

Zirņa bērni / Peasants

Puppet animation, 12 min, 2019, preschool-age children

■ This film is the cinematic continuation of a classic poem by the Latvian poet Rainis. It follows the subsequent adventures of its main heroes – eight peas – and their interactions with the world around them as well as with the cycles and laws of nature. These musical and countable stories tell about the peas’ adventures after spilling out of their original home, the pod.



Dace Rīdūze

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Locomotive Productions

The *Locomotive Productions* film studio produces fiction, creative documentaries and animation. Founded in 1999, in recent years it has become one of the fastest growing, most creative and most productive film studios in the Baltic countries. Nearly all of the films produced by *Locomotive Productions* have been premiered at well-known international film festivals.

The director of *Locomotive Productions* is producer Roberts Vinovskis, who has been active in the film industry since the early 1990s. The studio has mainly worked with live action films, but recently animation has begun playing a larger role as well. “The way that I, as a producer, arrived at animation was actually a matter of chance,” says Vinovskis. “But it didn’t come as a surprise to me, because in cinema, I believe it’s important to make good films and stories; the technique through which one achieves that should be the one that’s most appropriate for each particular story.”

To date, *Locomotive Productions* has participated in the creation of seven animated

films: three feature-length and four short films. The studio’s first animation project was independent director Nils Skapāns’ plasticine animated short film *Cat in the Bag / Kaķis maisā* (2013). This was followed by a collaboration with internationally recognised, New York-based director Signe Baumann for her full-length film *Rocks in My Pockets / Akmeņi manās kabatās* (2014). As the minority partner in the co-production, *Locomotive Productions* was responsible for the film’s distribution in Latvia, where attracting audiences is a challenge. Vinovskis comments: “The film’s theme is quite specific. It was clear from the outset that this wasn’t going to be a box-office hit. But as a producer, it’s precisely this kind of projects that interest me; that’s where the adrenaline is. And, considering all of that, the film has done very well in Latvia. In the global context, too, the film has had visibility – more than 200 festivals. The world premiere of this film was the first time in the history of the Karlovy Vary festival that an animated film was included in the official selection.” ▶



As Latvia's centenary approached, *Locomotive Productions* worked on *Before the Day Breaks / Saule brauca debesīs*, whose director, Roze Stiebra, received the Latvian National Film Award for lifetime achievement while work on the film was still underway. Although it was the 66th film in her career, this was the first film Stiebra had made in almost a decade. It was also the first time the studio had brought together such a large team – thirty people – needed to create a full-length animated film. “I don't know which higher powers stood by us,” says Vinovskis, “but we were able to put together a team that was entirely from Latvia, in spite of the fact that there aren't all that many animators in Latvia.”

Having successfully finished the animation process for *Before the Day Breaks*, the studio began working on its next challenge, namely, the first Latvian feature-length animated film for adults. Bauman's newest film, *My Love Affair with Marriage / Mans laulību projekts*, will premiere in late 2019 and is being created as a majority co-production with the United States. Vinovskis is hopeful about the result: “There's a lot of interest from festivals as well as sales agents. There's no doubt that this film of Signe's will be no less successful with audiences than her previous one. In fact, this film might in a way even be easier for viewers. The manner of narration and the director's style remain very similar, but this one has a lot of music and acting; it's almost something of a musical. And the theme is more universal – it's no longer about depression but instead about marriage and gender stereotypes, about the roles of the man and woman in the family and in society. It's a theme that addresses almost every adult who lives in a community rather than all alone in the forest. And so I believe that the potential audience is very, very broad.”

When the studio finishes this current project, *Locomotive Productions* plans to provide animation services or perhaps take on another large project with the aim of maintaining the professional team it has painstakingly put together. ■



My Love Affair with Marriage

Most-significant films:

Akmeņi manās kabatās / Rocks in My Pockets

Signe Bauman, stopmotion, drawn and papier mâché animation, 88 min, 2014, Latvia / United States, adults, dialogue in English and Latvian [see more on pp. 26–27]

Saule brauca debesīs / Before the Day Breaks

Roze Stiebra, drawn animation, 75 min, 2018, Latvia, universal audiences, dialogue (see more on pp. 6–7)

■ The Sun and Moon have a baby, and mummies arrive to welcome the Daughter of the Sun. Amid the joyous crowds, no one notices that the Daughter has disappeared, and everyone is suddenly stunned to see an empty cradle. However strong the Sun and Moon are, they cannot find their Daughter nor bring her back home. It turns out they need a human being! And so Nabašnieks, along with a little girl and her young brother who were among the mummies just a short while ago, volunteer to help and go out into the big, wide world to find the Daughter of the Sun and bring her home.

Coming soon:

Mans laulību projekts / My Love Affair with Marriage

Signe Bauman, stopmotion papier mâché, drawn animation, 95 min, 2020, Latvia / United States, adults, dialogue in English and Latvian [see more on pp. 26–27]





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Latvians abroad

Latvia is a small country, and we do not have many animation directors. Therefore each and every one of them is important to us, even if he or she has been living and working abroad for a long time. These four active animation directors based outside of Latvia have also managed to preserve their Latvian identity and style – all the more reason to consider them our own, in spite of the fact that their films are often made entirely in another countries.

Signe Baumane

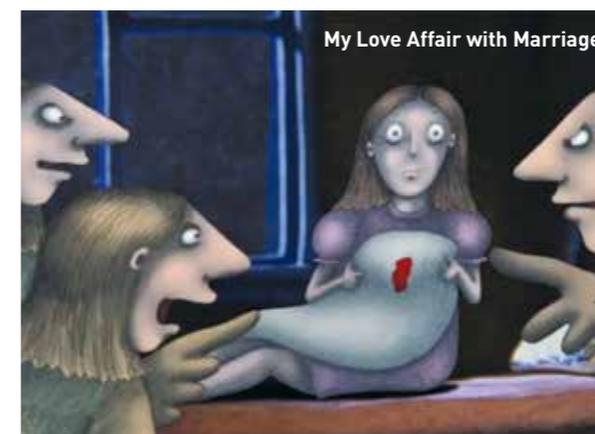
Signe Baumane is a Latvian living in the United States. Although she has not studied animation, she is nevertheless one of the best-known Latvian animators in the world thanks to her distinct personal style and courageous themes. Her films are diverse in terms of colour and technique as well as structure; expressive and clever visual metaphors have become an integral feature of her style. Baumane gives an exterior language to the various internal, yet hidden, psychological processes that influence our communication with others and how we perceive the world around us.

Baumane started as an animation director in Latvia, but she gained international recognition in the world of animation with her series of short films titled *Teat Beat of Sex* (2008). In addition to several other short-format projects, this popular series was followed by her first

feature-length animated film, *Rocks In My Pockets / Akmeņi manās kabatās* (2014). In it, she combined characters drawn in the classical animation technique with a filmed background made of papier mâché. It has a first-person narrative recorded by Baumane herself; her voice in combination with the film's general ironic mood creates the kind of closeness one enjoys with a conversation partner who is able to laugh about herself and life's difficulties.

For her upcoming project, *My Love Affair with Marriage / Mans laulību projekts*, Baumane is using the same animation technique but has expanded it. The voices of the film's thirty characters have been recorded by actors from New York, including Matthew Modine, who has worked with Hollywood heavyweights such as Stanley Kubrick and Christopher Nolan. *My Love Affair...* is a coming-of-age story about a woman ▶

and her search for romantic fulfilment. It is based on Baumane's own personal experience – openness has always been a hallmark of her work. In addition to following the course of several love affairs, the film also touches upon the biological processes at work when we fall in love with someone and society's glorification of romantic fulfilment. The main hero, Zelma, sincerely believes that the meaning of life lies in love and that there's an "other half", or soul mate, for everyone. But she always ends up in a dead end. *My Love Affair...* is a study about myths, reality and femininity. ■



Most-significant film:

Akmeņi manās kabatās / Rocks in My Pockets

Stop motion, drawn animation, 88 min, 2014, Latvia / United States, adults

■ A story based on real people and events. The director tells about five women in her family, including herself, and their battles with life's challenges, depression and mental illness. In this bleak yet funny film, the twists and turns of Latvian history are interlaced with personal experiences and stories about family secrets, love and marriage.

Coming soon:

Mans laulību projekts / My Love Affair with Marriage

Stop motion papier mache, drawn animation, 95 min, 2020, Latvia / United States, adults

■ In her search for true love, a fiery young woman with a wild imagination journeys through several marriages – some real, some imaginary – while confronting pressures from society and her own biology, all of which influences her moods and behaviour.



Signe Baumane
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Ilze Burkovska-Jacobsen

Ilze Burkovska-Jacobsen is a Latvian who has lived in Norway since the early 1990s. She has created several personal documentary films, the most recent of which is *My Favorite War / Mans mīlākais karš*, which tells about her childhood and youth in the Soviet Union during the Cold War. This newest film by Burkovska-Jacobsen makes use of both animated and documentary materials. It continues the collaboration between the *Bivrost Film&TV* studio in Norway and the *Ego Media* studio in Latvia, also engaging Latvian animation specialists from *Tritone Studio*. Approximately 80% of the film is animated, with the rest consisting of archival materials or contemporary documentary footage. Burkovska-Jacobsen has chosen to rely on the language of animation, because it most precisely portrays people, events or environments that remain only in the memory. Most of the film is created in a digital-application style, but episodes and scenes depicting different eras, other people's stories or the protagonist's own imagination are created using 3D animation. The task of the documentary materials also depends on the content of each specific episode. The contemporary footage provides a summary of preceding scenes, and the archival materials illustrate features of the era that the director wishes to emphasise in each particular setting. In several instances, archival footage is combined with animation in a single frame, as if the protagonist were watching a television programme or sitting in a movie theatre. Svein Nyhus (Norway) is the main artist for *My Favorite War*; the animation is created by animators from Latvia. ■



Coming soon:

Mans mīlākais karš / My Favorite War

Classic animation with documentary footage, 80 min, 2019, Latvia/Norway, adults, dialogues

■ An animated documentary film with an anti-war message for a global audience. The plot line follows the director's own development as a person, from a playful childhood fascination to an independent and critical attitude towards the destructive evil of war and armed conflict. The action takes place during the director's childhood and youth in Kurzeme, on the far western edge of the Soviet Union. The film makes use of a wide range of stories, memories and facts about the Second World War in Kurzeme, with a main focus on the experiences of the civilian population. The film thus reflects two periods in Latvian history: 1944-1945 in Kurzeme and the 1970s-1980s during the Soviet era. The film's premiere is planned for autumn 2019.



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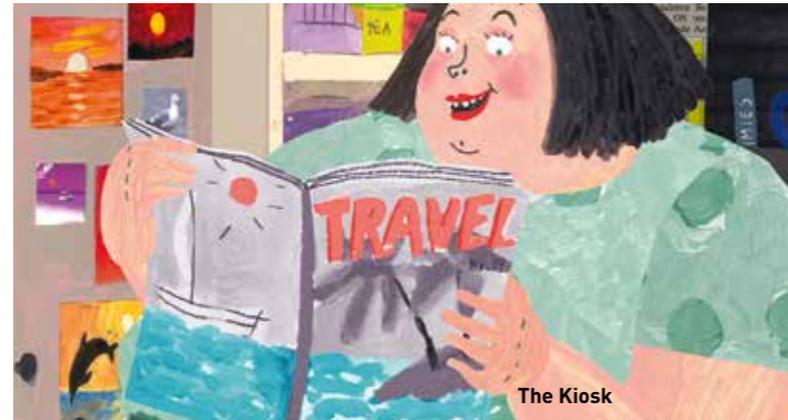
Anete Melece

Anete Melece was born in Latvia in 1983. She studied visual communication at the Art Academy of Latvia (BA) and animation at Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Art (MA). She is an illustrator and animation filmmaker currently based in Zürich, Switzerland. Melece created her first animated works while still a student at the Art Academy of Latvia, and these revealed the budding director's warm sense of humour and love of cut-out animation. One of these films, *Vilma Doesn't Work Today / Vilma šodien nestrādā* (2007), was her first short to attract global attention; it was followed by *The Kiosk / Kiosks* (2013), one of the most popular Latvian animated films of the past decade. After that, Melece headed to Lucerne, where her next film, *Analysis Paralysis*, premiered. The film is now also being screened around the world.

Melece moved to Switzerland for personal reasons and she was soon heartily accepted into the country's small but dynamic animation community. She considers herself an artist with two nationalities: "Switzerland is unique for being a country with four languages and several dialects. So, even if you speak only broken German, no one will look at you askance; it's easy to feel accepted in this diverse environment. At the same time, my cultural baggage is nevertheless a bit different, and that's good, because an artist needs to be a bit peculiar. I can reflect the idiosyncrasies of the Swiss and at the same time notice my own."

Although Melece's characters are for the most part cosmopolitan, her work always contains at least a hint of her homeland, often in the form of an architectural gem or hidden corner of Riga. She comments with light irony: "It's easier for me to think about a film's action if I

imagine a specific location for it to take place, and yes, that's usually Riga. For example, Anton from *Analysis Paralysis* walks along a street in central Riga but lives in my cousin's apartment in a high-rise suburb of the city. And actually, if my thoughts are in Riga, but my head is in Zürich, then where are the things that I imagine located? If I think about that for too long, my head starts to swell..." ■



The Kiosk

Most-significant films:

The Kiosk / Kiosks

Digital cut-out animation, 7 min, 2013, Latvia, universal audiences, no dialogue

■ For years now, the kiosk has been Olga's little home simply because her sweet tooth and monotonous life have made her bigger than the kiosk's door. To distract herself, she reads travel magazines and dreams of being far away. One day, an absurd incident sets her off on her journey.

Analysis Paralysis / Analizes Paralyze

Cut-out animation, 2D computer animation, drawing on paper, 10 min, 2016, Latvia, adults, no dialogue

■ Anton is lost in his own head until one day a yellow boot brings him to an exit.



Anete Melece

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Lizete Upīte

Lizete Upīte has studied at the Baltic Film and Media School in Estonia, the Escola Superior Artística do Porto in Portugal, La Poudrière in France and the Art Academy of Latvia. She is a European director in the sense that she has made at least one film in every place where she has lived for more than a couple of months. "I always seem to be moving somewhere," she says. "I was in Estonia, then Portugal, then Latvia, and France, now Latvia again. If I've made a film in Latvia, it's completely different than if I'd made it in France or Portugal. I really like the fact that these influences are perceptible."

Night Walks / Nakts pastaigas, Upīte's first film made in Latvia, premiered in 2017 and earned five nominations for the Latvian National Film Awards – winning for best artwork and best sound design. In the film, Upīte invites the viewer on a nighttime walk through the forest: "I try to catch that wonderful and at once terrifying feeling you get when you walk through the forest at night, in total silence and darkness."

Upīte's work first attracted attention in 2013, with her studio film *Une nuit sur le lac / A Night on the Lake*, made while she was a fourth-year student at La Poudrière. She is currently in France again, at a residency and working on the short film *Rīgas cerīni / Riga's Lilac*. "The animation community in France is very large; it's very easy to find someone to share experiences with. Elsewhere, you often get the feeling that animation is more like a hobby, but in France it feels like a real job, real work, because there are more animation directors here," she says.

Riga's Lilac is a co-production with the French studio *Papy3D Productions*; the Latvian studio *Atom Art* is the



Riga's Lilac

minority partner. Upīte calls the film a tragicomic work of docufiction. It is based on interviews and, similarly to her other work, focuses on little-discussed corners of our internal world – this time, the realm of smells. ■

Most-significant films:

A Night on the Lake / Une nuit sur le lac

2D digital animation, 2013, 4 min, adults, dialogue

■ Madeleine and Henri have lived deep in the countryside for more than twenty years. One day, their regular daily quarrel takes an unexpected turn.

Nakts pastaigas / Night Walks

2D computer animation, painting on glass, cut-out animation, 6 min, 2018, children / adults, dialogue

■ Tonight Anna and her father have decided to walk home through the forest. Anna takes a torch, and her father lights it for her. The silent forest is as enchanting as it is scary, and the bright flame is as protective as it is blinding.

Coming soon:

Rīgas Cerīni / Riga's Lilac

2D computer animation, 14 min, 2019, universal, France / Latvia, adults, dialogue

■ Riga's Lilac is a tragicomic story about the social impact of a bad smell. In the style of a documentary film, the story is based on real interviews with people who reveal how overwhelmed they can be by the strong smell of another person.



Lizete Upīte

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Education opportunities

Ancient Undo

The Art Academy of Latvia is the first institution of higher education in Latvia to offer a course in animation technique and direction. In 2013 it established the “Motion. Image. Sound” bachelor’s (four years) and master’s (two years) programmes within the Faculty of Audio-Visual Media Art. Instructors include Edmunds Jansons, Inga Prauliņa, Dzintars Krūmiņš and other well-known names in Latvian animation. The artist Ojārs Pētersons is the director of the programme.

At the secondary level, young animators (nowadays called multimedia design specialists) are being taught in the four-year Visual Communications Art programme at the Janis Rozentāls Riga Art School, which begins in the tenth grade. There, students are taught animation by Dzintars Krūmiņš, one of the most experienced 2D animation specialists in Latvia. Gints Zilbalodis is a recent graduate of the programme. Elementary-aged students can also participate in after-school activities in which they learn the foundations of visual art as well as animation.

In Riga, the Latvian capital, students can enrol in the “Multimedia Design Specialist – Animation” programme at the Riga Art and Media Technical School. Upon graduation, they receive a vocational secondary-education diploma that allows them to enter tertiary education or employment in their profession. The programme is four years long.

The Daugavpils Secondary School of Design and Art “Saules skola” offers a Multimedia Design programme directed by artist and animator Vladimirs Leščovs. The four-year programme prepares students for employment not only in animation but also video, graphic arts, sound and other media.

Likewise, animation can be studied at the Liepāja Music, Art and Design Secondary School. Its Multimedia Design programme teaches the foundations of 2D and 3D animation. If a student enrolls in 10th grade, the programme is four years long; if a student enrolls after 12th grade, the programme is two years long.

Students can also learn animation as a separate course in addition to audio-visual art and multimedia studies at various educational institutions and special interest education programmes outside of regular school programmes. For example, animator Ilze Ruska teaches animation to children and youth ages eight to 25 at the “Annas 2” Centre of Creative Learning. Master of plasticine animation Nils Skapāns teaches master classes and workshops for people of all ages, for example, as his stop-motion technique courses at the Riga Art and Media Technical School. ■

Vertigo



Most-significant films by students at the Art Academy of Latvia:

Ancient Undo

Laura Kļava, 2D classical animation, 3 min, 2018, Latvia, adults, no dialogue

■ Superstitious life is not easy. An unlucky day, year or life might be encountered at every turn. But Āboliņš has a secret weapon. Until...the solution becomes a problem.

Vertigo

Liāna Mihailova, 2D classical animation, 4 min, 2018, Latvia, adults, no dialogue

■ An exciting summer dive takes an unexpected turn and grows into an amplified experience when the diver faces the unsurpassable edge of the cliff.

Nerves on Nerves

Ance Kazāka, 2D classical animation, 4 min, 2018, adults, no dialogue

■ The main character finds himself frustrated and unconsciously crosses the line between “everyone is getting on my nerves” and “I’m getting on everyone’s nerves”.

Lust on the Hunt

Monta Andžejevska, 3D animation, 4 min, 2018, adults, no dialogue, subtitles in English

■ The routine of an online computer game player is disrupted by another player. He abandons the rules of the game to retain the new friendship.



Vladimirs Leščovs

Vladimirs Leščovs makes films in Latvia, where his Lunohod studio is registered. However, the scale he works on is international – for example, he has dedicated a short film to the Japanese (*The Letter from Hibakusha*, produced by the NHK Hiroshima Station and his only film with dialogue) and has collaborated with and co-produced films with Canadians and Estonians. *Electrician's Day / Elektriķa diena* (2018) is Leščovs' tenth animated film, not counting shorter films and intermedia projects, such as projections in collaboration with the Orbita collective of poets.

Electrician's Day is a monochrome film that calls to mind Leščovs' other recent films; although made in various different techniques, they share the same tonality – as do the sketches of his travels that he likes to make using coffee and black tea instead of ink. The film is drawn with brown India ink on paper and contains only a few colourful elements.

Leščovs animated films are figural; for the most part, they centre around a clear, albeit paradox-rich, fable told in laconic, pictorial form. His themes revolve around border situations where opposites meet: sleep and wakefulness, clarity and intoxication, life and death, meeting and parting. *Electrician's Day* focuses on the fragile border between what we call the mind and what we call madness. The action takes place in a psychiatric hospital. Medical institutions are often used in cinema to portray a social model in which to observe the relationship between power and normality and the influence habits and assigned roles have on our sense of self. In this film, too, hospital wards and hallways become a setting for a battle for identity. The main character, an electrician, receives a serious jolt of electricity while working on the hospital's wiring. He wakes up inside the hospital, where it seems he has lain for quite some time. Day follows day, and it becomes ever harder for him to imagine life outside the hospital.

When asked "Do you, as an animation director, have an obligation to speak about problems in society?" Leščovs explains his position: I don't like the word "obligation" in this context. There's status as a citizen, respect, self-awareness, responsibility, honour. I don't think it's right to link obligation with forms of artistic expression. Let's leave that word for our political representatives, the servants of the people. ■

Most-significant films:

Electrician's Day / Elektriķa diena

Classical animation, 8 min, 2018, adults, no dialogue

■ An accident happens during repairs at a psychiatric hospital. As a result, an electrician loses consciousness and finds himself on the other side of the wall.

Villa Antropoff

Vladimirs Leščovs and Kaspars Jancis, classical animation, 13 min, 2012, adults, no dialogue

■ An ironic story about dreams and losing dreams. Inspired by a real event, when both directors found themselves at a strange wedding celebration in the villa of former USSR leader Yuri Andropov near Pärnu in Estonia.

Wings and Oars / Spārni un airi

Classical animation, 6 min, 2009, adults, no dialogue

■ A former pilot looks back over his life: the Earth, the Sky, the Woman – everything that took place on the journey from an air strip to an abandoned boat house. Memories and flashes of various time periods create a surreal mood in which the present, past and future all exist at the same time.

Lost in Snow / Zuduši sniegā

Classical animation, 8 min, 2007, adults, no dialogue

■ A man goes ice-fishing on a winter day. But he is not alone. And his day on the ice involves more than catching fish.

Insomnia / Bezmiegs

Classical animation, 7 min, 2004, adults, no dialogue

■ She arrives in the night, silent as a cat. She will not let him fall asleep until he feeds her. She wants milk, which he will find between a dream and reality. Her name is Insomnia. The glimmering characters drawn in coloured pencil highlight the turbulent state between sleep and wakefulness.



Coming soon:

Winter Landscape with Skaters / Ziemas ainava ar slidotājiem

■ Vladimirs Leščovs on his upcoming film: "It's an animated short film with the working title Winter Landscape with Skaters / Ziemas ainava ar slidotājiem. It tells about early interests, hobbies and childhood dreams that were left by the wayside only to reappear later in life to help one overcome hardships and difficulties as an adult. It's a story about how, in spite of history, socio-political systems, religions and other circumstances, people have a lot more in common with each other than they think."



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Kārlis Vītols



The End

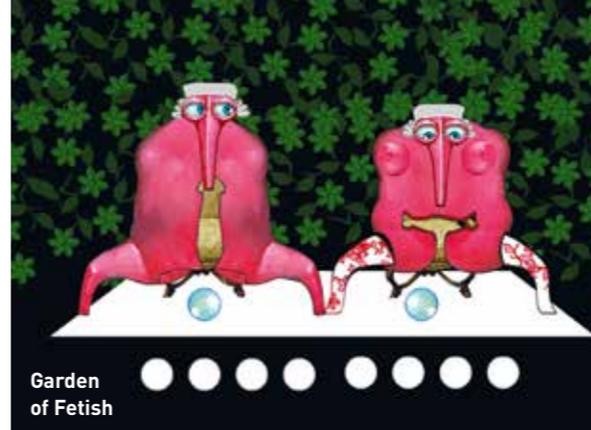
In Latvia, Kārlis Vītols is known as a painter who organises wide-ranging solo exhibitions featuring large-format figural compositions and also as the creator of the animated film trilogy *Garden of Fetish / Fetišu dārzs* (2006), *Eclipse / Aptumsums* (2010) and *The End / Beigas* (2018), which he made specifically to be shown on an art gallery wall. “I believe that the gallery format is determined by the film’s openness to interpretations of perception,” he says. “People go to the cinema to be entertained – to be spoon-fed content and to have their senses jarred. I find art-exhibition films to be much freer, because they let the viewer meditate and experience more. Also important is the fact that an exhibition hall is not a movie theatre – in other words, a large room where a collective body of people have a collective experience. Instead, it’s more like a chapel, where you sit alone, contemplate and experience.”

Vītols has experimented with various animation techniques, such as digital cut-out, 3D computer animation in combination with watercolour, and painting on glass. “I have a tough time with materials and techniques, because almost all of the techniques interest me. I see something at a festival, and ahhh, I want to try that, too! But time and resources are a different matter, and the lack of both usually leads me back to computer cut-out animation,” he admits.

And yet, Vītols nevertheless manages to include a variety of materials in his films: photographs, drawings, paintings by himself and other artists, newspaper clippings, posters, quotes from art history. His first animated film, *The Trophy / Trofeja* (2004), was shown at the Arsenāls film forum and won the award for best animated film in the Baltic section; it was also nominated for best artwork in the Latvian National Film Festival. This recognition made it easier for Vītols to gain funding for his next films.

In 2006, Vītols released the animated film *Garden of Fetish*, which became the first part of a self-reflective meditation. The main character in the film is an artist looking for the entrance to his own garden. While crawling around corners and walls, he comes across unfamiliar objects, meets evil spirits that look like shamanic masks and is pulled into a number of strange coincidences. *The End* (2018), the final film of Vītols’ *Gallery Trilogy*, was visually inspired by David Hockney’s painting *A Bigger Splash* and captures that superficial vibration of the vision of an affluent life. Art historians describe Vītols’ work as “light existentialism whose pop-like moods are also characteristic of his previous animated and non-animated projects”.

Vītols made *The End* in a relatively short time and without a script or story board in the traditional sense. He believes such tools are necessary if several people are working on a film together; however, with his auteur form of animation, “there is no need for communicative intermediaries between the brain and the hands that execute the work.” In place of a script, he has “characters that have been giving me no peace for many years”, and the outlines of the script reveal ▶



Garden of Fetish



Minotaurus

themselves while working with mise-en-scènes. “It’s hard for me to imagine how one might use words to describe a black bubble with tentacles so that the result is just as powerful as what you see in an animated film on screen. But that’s the eternal problem with animated films – they’re difficult to describe, and besides, the description usually has to be done already during the project stage, long before anything appears on screen,” says Vītols.

Vītols’ upcoming film, *The Swan Maiden / Gulbju jaunava*, is based on the stories of Kārlis Skalbe. Until now, the work of this classic Latvian author has been cinematized only by the animation masters Arnolds Burovs and Roze Stiebra. When asked whether viewers should expect something radical this time, Vītols says: “I hope it won’t be anything radical, because I had already been reaching out towards Skalbe for many years until it all finally came together. I like the challenge of cinematizing a work in which all of its beautiful essence – the reason why I’m doing it – is written between the lines.” ■

Most-significant films:

Beigas / The End

Digital animation / original technique, 15 min, 2018, adults, no dialogues

■ The heavenly Count Pīlādzis sees a younger version of himself reflected in the water. Being a slave to vanity, he must now observe his own withering away and turns to various clichéd survival strategies: the breasts and legs of pretty girls, a house with a pool, a fancy car and endless sleepless nights.

Mīnotaurus / Minotaurus

Oil on glass, 8 min, 2016, adults, no dialogues

■ While Father is at work, little Minotaurus looks for playmates. In the endless labyrinth, he finds mythological figures who are occupied with their own ambitions.

Aptumsums / Eclipse

Digital animation / original technique, 10 min, 2010, adults, no dialogues

■ As the shadow of the moon covers the earth during the solar eclipse, the twilight creatures come to life, the boundary between the real and the imagined vanishes, and a transcendental ritual takes place in nature.

Fetišu dārzs / Garden of Fetish

Digital animation / original technique, 10 min, 2006, adults, no dialogues

■ The film analyses the abstract components that make up a work of art as well as the fetishes cultivated by the artist while creating it.



The Swan Maiden



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Indra Sproģe

Indra Sproģe's studio *infinityBOX* was established in 2012, by three people form the core of the studio: artist Indra Sproģe, camera operator Mārtiņš Veļa and designer/light artist Kaspars Maračkovskis. They base their creative work on various combinations of art, technology and technique and also invite other artists and animators when the pace of work becomes more intense. The studio usually works on one film at a time, the length of which varies from project to project. Initially, *infinityBOX* focused on the educational animated films for children *Māci mani, Degunlāci! / Teach Me, Nose-Bear* (2012), which teaches children the multiplication table, and *Awesome Beetle's Colours* (2016) to help them learn the alphabet. The latter film

won an award at the Annecy festival in the educational film category.

With its first project, *Teach Me, Nose-Bear!*, the studio tried out all possible animation techniques, gradually developing and defining its own specific style: a combination of classic animation, plasticine animation and chiaroscuro on various textured backgrounds. In an effort to find the best combination of these three elements, the filmmakers at *infinityBOX* continue to fine-tune their style with each new project. To help with this process of discovery, the studio welcomes collaborations involving various animation techniques and has also begun making allegorical short films for adults. ■



Introduction to an Epilogue



Awesome Beetle's Colors



Where is the Key?

Most-significant films:

ievads epilogam / Introduction to an Epilogue

Plasticine, tracing paper, 9 min, 2018, adults, no dialogues

■ An allegorical animated film about the fear of death, which, it turns out, is in fact a narcissistic emotion. The film reflects man's transformation at truly difficult life moments and his ability to accept the inevitable and understand that life is always just one life long.

Awesome Beetle's Colors

Plasticine, acrylic, pastels, 3 min, 2016, children's film, dialogues

■ A colourful, surreal animated film that presents the English alphabet three times. The film received the Cristal Award at Annecy and has been screened at more than one hundred festivals on five continents.

Coming soon:

Atslēgu meklētāja / Where is the Key?

Classic and plasticine animation, 5 min, 2019, adults

■ A 2D and 3D allegorical animated film with dialogue and music by Mārtiņš Brauns. While the hero of the film searches for her keys, her life is flat and lacks a sense of space and scope. This is also reflected in the choice of animation technique. When she finds the keys, the world becomes colourful and takes on proper dimensions. The technique changes, too, to stop-action plasticine animation.

As of early 2019, this project is still in production. The studio is still working on the script, developing characters, structuring the framing and continuing to experiment with its animation style. It plans to finish the project on September 2, 2019.



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Nils Skapāns

Nils Skapāns is an independent puppet animation director as well as the scriptwriter, animator and often also the artist for his own films. He has made almost 40 short films to date, and in 2019 is working on two new challenges.

A self-educated director, Skapāns originally worked as DOP for classical drawn animation at the *Dauka* studio. In 1993 he began working at the *Animācijas Brigāde* puppet animation studio, where he directed and co-authored the script for the *Munk and Lemmy / Munks un Lemijs* series. Less than two years after joining the studio, his short film *Let's Fly?! / Lidojam?!* (1994), from the same series, received Latvia's first Crystal Bear in the Generation children's competition at the Berlin International Film Festival.

The next turning point in Skapāns' career was the short film *Brickannia / Klucānija* (2002), created using turned blocks of wood. Following this film, he established his own brand, *Nilsons*, and turned to plasticine animation, the technique in which his most popular films have been made. "The *Animācijas Brigāde* studio follows a fairly uniform classical style, but I wanted to do something different. I understood that I needed to get away and do my own thing. And, well, plasticine is simply a very accessible and egalitarian material that any dabbler can work with, so I began using it," says Skapāns.

In those first years, Skapāns tried various puppet animation techniques and also a variety of genres, for a time even focusing on making animated films for adult audiences. In the end, however, he returned to plasticine animation and has since become a master of the art. With his films *Listen, Rabbit!... Daddy Goes*

to London / Redzi, Trusi!... Tētis brauc uz Londonu (2004) and *Wonderful Day / Burvīga diena* (2010), he also returned to the children's competition at the Berlin International Film Festival.

Around the same time, Skapāns began a collaboration with the *Lokomotive* studio, which produced four of his animated short films for children. He is currently producing films with *VFS Studio*. These projects include the film *All My Friends Are Dead / Visi mani draugi ir miruši*, which represents Skapāns' first foray into silicon puppet animation: "This is an opportunity to try out using silicon puppets, which I also plan on using in the second project I have going on at the moment, *The Nap / Diendusa*. And this project is special because of the fact that I'm collaborating with the young and promising animation enthusiast Anna Zača, who is also the head of the Latvian Animation Association."

As work continues on *The Nap*, the director and his producer, Uldis Cekulis, are consulting with children between the ages of seven and ten in order to create a script that's as exciting as possible for this children's sci-fi adventure film. ■



The Nap [Characters sketch]



Most-significant films:

Klucānija / Brickannia

Stop motion, wood, 6 min, 2000, adults, no dialogue

■ Strange, bird-like, meteorite-eating creatures live on a planet not far from Earth. Their problems are different from ours, and their joys... well, it's difficult to tell exactly what those are. But as we become more familiar with the birds' world, we see that there are nevertheless plenty of similarities with our own world.

Redzi, Trusi!... Tētis brauc uz Londonu / Listen, Rabbit!... Daddy Goes to London

Plasticine animation, 8 min, 2004, children's film, no dialogue

■ A film about a little girl, her beloved toy rabbit and her always-busy father, who doesn't even notice that his daughter and the rabbit have figured out a way to accompany him to London. Who would have thought that an ordinary suitcase is such a great means of transport?

Burvīga diena / Wonderful Day

Plasticine animation, 15 min, 2010, children, no dialogue

■ The carefree and flighty Witch lives with her grey tomcat, listens to tango music and enjoys life. That life becomes even more exciting when a very ordinary day turns into an adventure and becomes an extraordinary day.

Coming soon:

Visi mani draugi ir miruši / All of My Friends Are Dead

Nils Skapāns and Anna Zača, stop motion/puppet animation, 5 min, 2019, young adults / adults, no dialogue

Diendusa / The Nap

Stop motion / puppet animation, 25 min, 2019/2020, children's film, dialogue



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Jurģis Krāsons

Jurģis Krāsons is a feature-film artist who studied to be a painter and turned his attention to animated films in 2006. He worked with the *Rija* and *Kompānija Hargla* studios and went on to establish his own animation studio, *Krasivo Limited*, in 2015. The studio currently has two employees, including the director, bringing in experienced animators for individual projects. Each year, the studio has an average of five to seven film projects in addition to its other principal activity of designing costumes for art films made in Latvia and abroad.

To Swallow a Toad / Norīt krupi (2010), a short

created by Krāsons at the *Rija* studio that has gained recognition at several film festivals, was made in the classic 2D technique. At *Krasivo Limited*, however, he is working on a combination of 2D and 3D computer animation. Krāsons' upcoming film *In the Pipe / Trubā* is made by integrating the 2D technique for character animation and the 3D technique for backgrounds. He used a similar approach in *How I Gave Up Smoking / Kā es atmetu smēķēšanu* (2016). *In the Pipe* features a new technical aspect: background animation made possible by 3D technologies. ■

Most-significant films:

Kā es atmetu smēķēšanu / How I Gave Up Smoking

3D computer animation, 11 min, 2016, a film for adults, no dialogues

■ The habit of smoking will truly be broken by the end of this film. At the beginning of the film, however, a Scandinavian woman almost dies because the main character lights a cigarette at an airport.

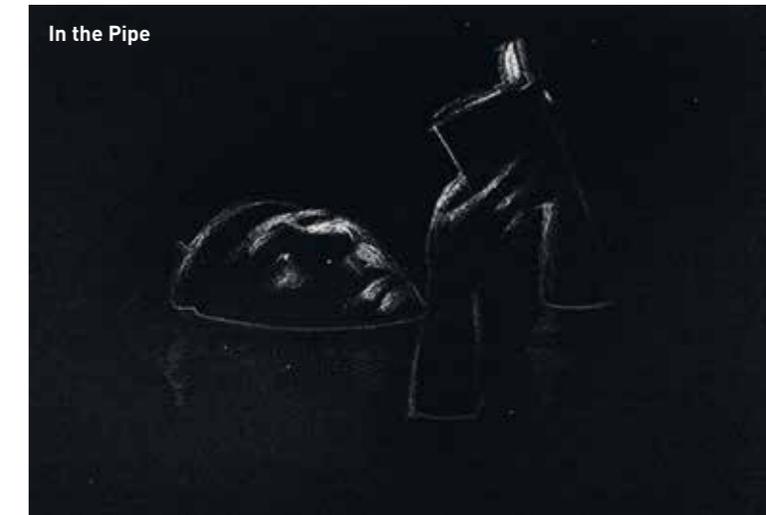
Norīt krupi / To Swallow a Toad

At *Rija Films*, classic animation, 9 min, 2010, adults, no dialogues

■ Once upon a time, the rotund intellectuals lived in a small town. They were smart, good-natured, prescient and successful. And this success was based on their ability to...swallow a toad. In other words, to swallow their pride, or overcome offence. The square, practical workers also lived in this same town. They were pragmatic realists who rewarded good with good and evil with evil and did not swallow any toads. A peaceful coexistence. But one day one of the squares inadvertently found out that the rotunds swallowed toads.



How I Gave Up Smoking



In the Pipe



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Aqua



Away

Gints Zilbalodis

Gints Zilbalodis is a young animator and director who already has considerable experience in the field. After several shorts that gained recognition at film festivals, he began an independent, feature-length project of his own, the animated film *Away / Projām*. The first part of the project, titled *Oasis / Oāze*, premiered in 2017 and introduced audiences to the hero of the story, whose adventures now continue in the full-length version. However, Zilbalodis emphasises that *Oasis* was only an excerpt of the whole story; it has now been completely reworked and no longer exists as a stand-alone entity.

Zilbalodis has chosen to work alone because he wishes to learn all of the aspects of film production; besides, working alone simply seemed easier and cheaper at the time. When asked, after three and a half

years of work, whether he still believes this to be the case, he says yes. The lack of a team also allowed him to get by without a storyboard, meetings, obstacles and instructions from others, thus saving time and giving him more creative freedom. This is one of the reasons why Zilbalodis has focused on animation – it is a technique that can be learned independently (as he has done himself) and lends itself well to working with a small team where he does not need to fear losing his original creative ideas. However, now that he has accumulated some experience and established various contacts, Zilbalodis is considering doing his next project together with a small team in Latvia or abroad.

Having tried his hand at classic animation, Zilbalodis has now turned to 3D computer animation, because it lets him use the camera as if in a feature film yet still retain the endless possibilities provided by animation. Thus he can create a setting that exists somewhere between a real and stylised environment. In *Away*, there is an emphasis on camera movement, creating the impression that the action has been filmed by a camera operator even though the animated characters do not lay any claim to being realistic – ▶

the shadowless, featureless figures perform against a realistic background of, for example, clouds or other natural landscapes.

Zilbalodis does not wish to say much about his future plans; he prefers to immerse himself in a single project and wait for the next project to appear on its own. Seeing how his style has developed, one can expect that Zilbalodis' future work will likely gravitate towards magical realism and the abstract rather than the depiction of reality. ■



Priorities

Most-significant films:

Projām / Away

3D computer animation, 75 min, 2019, young adults, no dialogues

■ A boy wakes up in the desert next to a downed airplane. A mysterious monster emerges from the wreck and starts pursuing the boy. His only salvation is an oasis, but it's too lonely to live there for very long. One day the boy finds an orphaned bird, teaches it to fly, and soon both of them are ready to head out into the world to look for others like them.

Prioritātes / Priorities

3D animation, 9 min, 2014, young adults, no dialogues

■ A story about a young man, who is fighting for survival, and his dog, who is only fighting for his master's attention.

Aqua

Classic animation, 7 min, 2012, young adults, no dialogues

■ A cat wakes up in the middle of the ocean and must extricate itself from this complicated, scary situation.



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Foreign specialists on Latvian animation:

Vassilis Kroustallis (Greece)

Vassilis Kroustallis is a Film and Animation professional and scholar from Greece, currently based in Estonia. He is Head Editor of Zippy Frames, an international online animation magazine promoting European and Independent Animation worldwide.



■ When I hear the words “contemporary Latvian animation”, they call to mind something noble, not always sweet to behold, but something definitely interesting to watch. Vladimir Leschiov, Signe Baumane, Edmunds Jansons, Kārlis Vītols, Jūrgis Krāsons, Gints Zilbalodis and their films

remind me of artists wanting to rise above national borders, looking at the guy or the girl within them. It’s these identity issues that register with me the most, treated either psychologically, politically or surrealistically as your own problems and mirrors. You can’t help but empathise with those anti-heroes, who sometimes turn to Greek myths for inspiration or travel the Japanese seas. It helps that the autumnal palette of these animation works (the French *Kirikou* and *the Sorceress* was also shot in Latvia) is inviting, humane, and their animation devoid of flashy moving elements. This bittersweet candy is engaging. ■

Otto Alder (Switzerland)

Former director of the Leipzig Film Festival, animation programme. 1995 Cofounder of the Fantoche International Animation Festival. Works as programme curator for film festivals internationally, as a filmmaker, and as a lecturer in The History of Moving Images at the HSLU (Hochschule Luzern – Design & Kunst). 2007-11 co-director of the HSLU animation department.

■ Animation art from Latvia put the country on the world map! My general focus is animation as art – animation applied as a technique for individual artistic expression. Commissioned animation and industry are not my field of interest. If asked as a historian about “animation in Latvia”, of course the first to come to mind is the puppeteer Arnold Burovs. Also the pioneers of 2D animation Roze Stiebra and Ansis Berzins, who have all left their mark on Latvian animation history and earned international recognition.

But since Latvian independence in 1991, and in connection with transformation and digitisation, our world, and especially the world of animation, has changed fundamentally. There are a few Latvian artists, such as Vladimir Leschiov and Signe Baumane, who have marked this period through their continuous output of great films. For many years, Leschiov has



successfully represented his country all over the world with his outstanding and unique animations. For me, his artistic animation work stands out. ▶

He and his films are the best ambassadors for his country. Baumane is also a globally known animation artist. But sometimes I feel that she is Latvian and sometimes American. However, Baumane’s work is nevertheless closely connected with her country. Lately, work by artists such as Edmunds Jansons and Aija Bley has also had a very strong aesthetic impact at festivals around the world.

There are nowadays many outstanding talents and masters in Latvian animation. From a distance, however, it seems to me that there is not yet a solid and relevant public funding system (pre-production, production, distribution, festivals, schools, ateliers, residencies, etc.) that offers this new generation of artists long-term economic perspectives for artistic creation. ■

Dina Goder (Russia)

Theatre expert, theatre critic, Programme Director of the Big Festival of Animation.



■ In my opinion, there are changes happening in Latvian animation right now. It’s becoming modern, European and current in terms of fine art and style, although it’s still very small – there are perhaps one, two, maybe three films at festivals.

Nevertheless, it’s important to note that a few Latvian animation directors already meld easily into the European context; viewers may not even realise where they’re from. In my opinion, two Latvian directors are currently extremely important in the world: Vladimir Leschiov and Edmunds Jansons as well as their studios. Jansons in particular is currently working quite a bit with new authors, inviting them to his studio.

Signe Baumane is, of course, another story. She feels completely at ease in the contemporary context, the feminist context, etc. She is one of those people who began long ago but are still working, because the themes they address are still current. Baumane has a wonderful sense of humour and a unique graphic

style; her work is immediately recognisable. That’s why Baumane is simply Baumane – it doesn’t even matter where she resides physically.

Jansons is definitely a very good teacher, because he focuses on people and listens carefully; in addition, he is a mild-mannered person by nature. I recently saw *Vertigo* by his student Liāna Mihailova – it’s a powerful example of the European school. Mihailova has a distinct and non-standard design that immediately lodges itself in the mind. And she does not work with linear narrative; instead, she builds it using the subconscious and emotions, but the viewer understands everything anyway. That, I believe, is a very important trait of Latvian animation in general.

Or, for example, the *Shammies / Lupatiņi* series. I haven’t seen much of it – nor have I seen it in translation, so I don’t understand the details – but I really love this project and am trying to popularise it in my circles. It seems to be a very promising project – they’re not just making a primitive product but instead using a complex, mixed technique with a charming approach, without too much “action” and with a gentle attitude towards the young child... Everywhere else we see one and the same thing, it all looks the same: running, chasing, very primitive design. But here children are introduced to good taste in design.

In my view, animation is currently the most progressive of arts. One can do anything in animation. If there are schools, if there are talented and charismatic people who are capable of leading, then everything will be fine. And I think Latvia has very good prospects. ■

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Cash Rebate

Latvia and its capital Riga provide great filmmaking opportunities characterised by accessibility, convenience, and the professionalism of the local film crews.

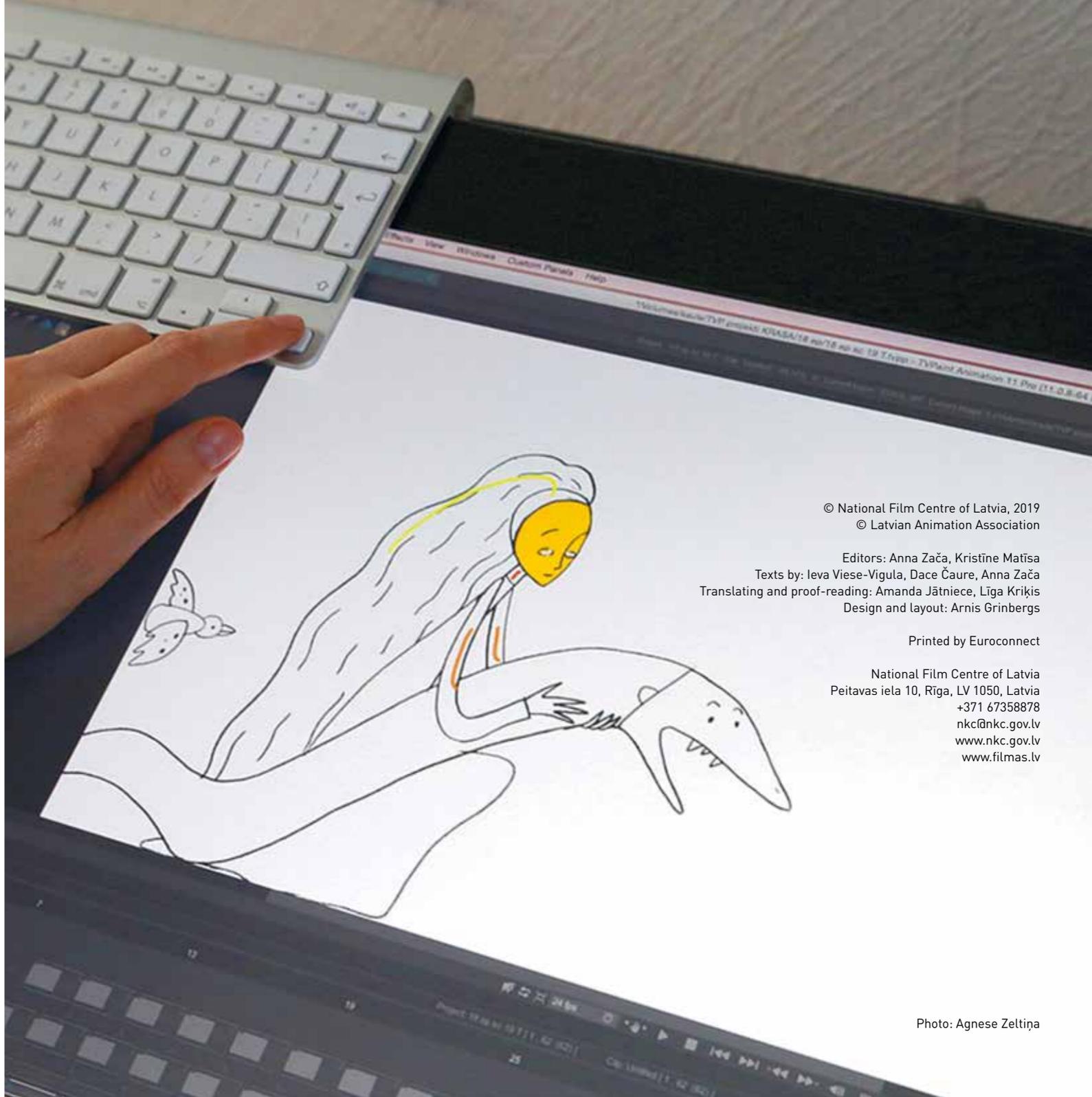
- Countless unexploited and diverse locations; rich architecture; stunning nature; four distinct seasons; cost-effective and reliable production; ease and flexibility in regards to securing filming permits; convenient travel routes by air, land or sea; access to Eurimages funding.

▪ **A cash rebate of up to 50%** of expenditures can be received on eligible production costs if the following two incentive schemes (20% or 25% each) are combined:

Latvian Co-Financing Fund of the National Film Centre	Riga City Council co-financing programme Riga Film Fund
ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At least 50% of the production funding should be confirmed upon application. • Services provided by private individuals or legal entities registered in Latvia are involved in the production of the film. • Costs are incurred through a Latvian production company. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feature-length fiction films, animation and documentaries. • Film shooting takes place fully or partly in Latvia. • Minimum total budget: EUR 711 436 for feature-length fiction or animation films; EUR 142 287 for documentaries. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feature-length fiction films or documentaries intended for theatrical or TV release. • Film shooting takes place fully or partly in Riga or any other location in Latvia. • Minimum total production budget: EUR 700 000.

ELIGIBLE EXPENSES

Production-related artistic, administrative and personnel costs; transport, location and equipment rentals; procurement; construction services; accommodation, catering, security, etc.



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Latvian Animation Association



Front cover: A film still from **Jacob, Mimmi and the Talking Dogs**
Edmunds Jansons, Atom Art (Latvia), Letko (Poland)
2D computer animation, 70 min, 2019